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# The research/teaching nexus in sociology: Perspectives from Norway, Hungary and England

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**Abstract**

There is a growing literature that has explored the dynamic intersections that exist between research and teaching in higher education institutions. However, there is also a paucity of research that has explored how this research/teaching nexus is realised within sociological practice. Drawing on comparative data from Norway, Hungary, and England, this paper explores how the research/teaching nexus is viewed by sociology academics ($N_{staff}$ = 30) and students studying at Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral levels ($N_{student}$ = 38). While the findings identify common concerns over the fragmentation of the discipline, the paper also demonstrates how sociological practice can produce transformative experiences that help to shape students' possible sociological futures. The paper argues that further attention to the nexus could help to articulate what is sometimes termed 'a provincialised sociology'. Further examination of how the nexus is realised beyond university is warranted.

**Key words**

research/teaching nexus

international comparative design

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## Introduction

The research/teaching nexus (RTN) refers to the complex interactions that exist between teaching and research in higher education institutions (Tight, 2016; Malcolm, 2014). These two core missions of universities share a nuanced range of relationships that are subject to a variety of influences over time (Geschwind and Brostrom, 2015; Malcolm, 2014; McKinley et al., 2021, Tight, 2016). This includes: disciplinary context; type of institution; funding mechanisms and policy contexts; contractual arrangements; and, career plans of students (Coate et al., 2001; Hordósy and McLean, 2022).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of 'what actually happens in practice' (Tight, 2016: 293), it is crucial to undertake a detailed and multi-layered exploration of the nexus in higher education institutions, including specific disciplinary settings. This can reveal important issues related to the (dys)functionality and characteristics of the RTN and help to shed light on practices across higher education settings (Trowler and Wareham, 2007; Hordósy and Norris, 2022). In many ways, sociology provides a compelling context to explore these intersections. Not only does the empirical focus of sociological work mean the link between research and teaching are necessarily close, the discipline is also linked strongly to societal change, with sociological knowledge potentially transformative in nature (Ashwin et al., 2016).

Drawing on comparative data from Norway, Hungary, and England, this paper explores how the research/teaching nexus is viewed by sociology academics and students studying at Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral levels. The paper makes three key points. First, it demonstrates there are similar concerns over the curriculum. These relate to the constraints on pedagogy and to the fragmentation of the discipline.

Second, the products of sociological experience - what we term the 'goods of sociology' - can became intertwined in students' fledging research practices and reflect the potentially transformative nature of the discipline. Third, closer relationships between students and academics can help students to understand sociological research practice and shapes the formation of their possible sociological futures, within *and* beyond sociology. While there are inevitable restrictions on how individual academics might achieve such outcomes, the paper argues that greater attention to the RTN could help to articulate what Holmwood (2009: 1.1) and others have called 'a provincialised sociology'. This is a sociology that has a shared purpose across national contexts, while retaining a focus on local concerns.

**The research/teaching nexus in sociology**

There is growing interest in the interconnections between research and teaching in Higher Education. This relationship is usually termed 'the research/teaching nexus' (RTN). Literature about the RTN has examined several key interests, including: the association between research outputs of staff and teaching evaluations; the student experience of the nexus; and the differences between institutional types and disciplines (Clark and Hordósy, 2019). Early research on the nexus tended to focus on the relationship between research outputs of academics and student satisfaction rates (Hattie and Marsh 1996). However, this often produced weak positive or undetectable associations because of the broader social, political and economic contexts within which the nexus exists (Coate et al, 2021; Trowler and Wareham, 2007). Indeed, Tight (2016) highlights the importance of national traditions when examining the RTN, observing interesting similarities and significant differences between national contexts. This can be seen, for instance, in comparisons between

France and the UK (Chiang, 2012); Sweden and England (Taylor, 2008); England and Holland (Leišytė et al., 2009); UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Duff et al., 2022); and, a wide range of 20 countries through the *Academic Profession in the Knowledge-Based Society* survey (Huang et al., 2022).

Elsewhere, the literature on individual experiences of the RTN has examined the identities, aspirations, and capacities of staff (Robertson, 2007; Shin, 2011; Weenink et al., 2024; Brew and Mantai, 2017, Hunag et al., 2022); the abilities, understandings, and motivations of students (McLean and Barker, 2004; Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2016; Macheridis et al., 2024); and, the contrasts between the two (Buckley, 2011; Zou et al., 2024; Griffioen, 2020). Studies have also explored the systemic concerns around the RTN, and the role of curriculum funding, institutional priorities, and disciplinary diversity (McKinley et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2018; Leišytė et al., 2009; Dandridge, 2023; Duff and Marriott, 2016).

More recent literature has also emphasised how dimensions of the nexus exist within curricular and extra-curricular activity, focusing on how these activities are incorporated into teaching (Clark and Hordósy, 2019). This work offers different models for the practical application of the nexus, such as Griffiths' (2004) proposal of research-led, -oriented, -based, and -informed teaching (see also Linn et al., 2015). In these respects, there is an emphasis on reflecting upon both the quality of research experiences and whether opportunities to create knowledge and enhance research skills are afforded to all (John and Creighton, 2011; Clark and Hordósy, 2019).

But despite the growing interest in the RTN, studies that have examined sociological practice remain limited – even though sociology is likely to be a particularly useful area to explore the interplay between research and teaching. In the first instance, the origins of the discipline are firmly intertwined with the history of empirical science, and the relationship between sociological theory, research method, and the social world has always been a central concern. Whether this be Durkheim's 'rules of sociological method' (Durkheim, 1895/1982), Park's exhortation to 'get the seat of your pants dirty in real world research' (see Lee, 2018), or Lazarsfeld's 'Bureau of Applied Social Research' (Lazarsfeld, 1968), the practical focus of *doing* research goes hand in hand with discussions about what is to be a sociologist and what it means to do sociological work.

Second, a historical alignment with philosophy also brings a reflective quality to the discipline where the process of 'finding out' is a key point of discussion in the production of knowledge. As a central focus for sociological practice, this methodological discourse is often pedagogical in tone as it provides a means through which the process of *doing* sociology can be communicated and learnt. Hammond's *Sociologists at work* (1964), or the collection of reflexive tales by Bell and Newby (1977) are classic examples of this tradition.

Third, whether the purpose of research is enlightenment, engineering, or praxis (see Hammersley, 1995), sociological knowledge can be transformative in nature (Ashwin, et al., 2016). Students are often motivated by wanting to understand social inequalities and seek to contribute to societal change. For Burawoy (2005), sociology is a

discipline infused with moral purpose, and social change can be a focus for study, an outcome of research, *and* a product of learning.

But while we might expect issues associated with the RTN to be particularly prescient to the experience of sociological academics and students, national traditions also remain relevant to the sorts of sociology that gets taught at universities. For example, it is true enough to say that Lazarsfeld still holds some influence over Norwegian 'problem-based sociology', albeit with a strong memory of Aubert and Christie (Birkelund, 2006; RCN, 2018). Britain also continues to retain an interest in the empirical application of theory (Halsey, 2004; Scott, 2020), while Hungarian sociology is characterised by the discontinuities that have existed between the academy and the State (Karády and Nagy, 2019; Szabari, 2020).

That said, increasing fragmentation and interdisciplinarity are noted features of sociological practice regardless of country (Aakvaag, 2019; Stefkovics et al., 2023). Holmwood (2010), for example, highlights that while sociology ‘exports’ concepts, methodologies and people to other disciplines, its inherent plurality can comprise its identity as a discipline. As a result, more general orientations to social research are often conflated with a specifically sociological imagination. This loss of disciplinary identity is compounded further given the increasing presence of science and technology studies (STS) and health studies in sociology departments and schools, where greater funding is available for projects allied to science and medicine (Holmwood, 2014). In these respects, Buroway argues that the spectre of instrumental, interdisciplinary social research threatens to erode core disciplinary

identities by becoming ‘the Trojan horse for the dissolution of particular disciplines by bringing them into a hierarchical relation with more powerful’ ones (Burawoy, 2013: 7).

With respect to teaching more specifically, the substance of any degree programme is also subject to the disciplinary gaze of global, national, and local education policy (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Central within this landscape is the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), which was established as a part of the Bologna process. This process aimed to converge higher education systems across Europe by harmonising study cycles; establishing a common credit system; enhancing student mobility; furthering quality assurance regimes; and promoting a European dimension in higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

The ENQA was designed to ensure that a ‘quality culture’ existed across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These macro-level processes emphasise institutional accountability and quality enhancement. They are also typically realised through a variety of national infrastructures. Although too voluminous to rehearse here (see Carvalho, Rosa, and Amaral, 2024, for some discussion), these systems are designed to support compliance with ENQA, but also help to direct subject specific standards in terms of content and delivery. In the UK, for example, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 2000, with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) expected to consult benchmarks when designing, delivering and reviewing programmes. Although they are reference points rather than requirements, the benchmarks for Sociology were first set in 2002, and amended in 2007, 2016 and 2019. They are scheduled for review in 2025-2026. While Harrison and Mears (2001) provide an early history of the development of this benchmarking process, wider

discussion of what might constitute a sociology undergraduate degree programme has been otherwise absent from the literature in the UK (although see McLean et al, 2017). This is also broadly true of both Norway and Hungary. Most degree programmes in Norway launched with the format of BA and MA degrees in 2003 (Kehm et al., 2010), with Hungary following in 2006 after some policy hesitation and resistance from the sector (Derényi, 2010). However, literature on the RTN remains sparse in all three countries, particularly in relation to sociological work.

So, while Hungary, Norway, and England have different traditions in respect to sociology, they are each subject to several collectivizing policy constraints in respect to the research/teaching nexus. Given the close relationship between research and teaching in the development of sociological knowledge and practice, it is important to examine how these intersections are experienced by students and staff, not least because concerns of disciplinary fragmentation have been reported across these contexts. Drawing on curriculum documents and semi-structured interviews with sociology students and teachers, this paper compares experiences of the research teaching nexus in England, Norway, and Hungary. It explores how centralising policy tendencies inherent in post-Bologna processes might be impacting the development of sociological practice across HEIs, and examines the role of research within sociological teaching and learning.

**Research design and methods**

This paper employs an international comparative research design using a mixed methods approach (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2014; Yin, 2017). Building on previous

comparative projects on the RTN, the case selection reflects Esping-Andersen's (1996, 2015) European welfare-state regimes comprising Norway (social-democratic country), Hungary, (post-Soviet regime), and England (liberal welfare state). Drawing on curriculum documents taken from 38 programmes, the paper first explores the overall patterns of sociology Bachelor curricula in the three case-study contexts. Semi-structured interviews with sociology students and staff ($N=_{TOT}38$) taken from two institutional case studies in each country are then used to examine the similarities and differences in experiences of the RTN and the role of research in personal projects.

The objective of analysing curriculum documents is to investigate the theoretical, methodological, and thematic emphases present in undergraduate degrees across the sample nations. For Norway (7 universities) and Hungary (9 universities), this examination covered all institutions that had a) a BA programme in 2021; and b) consistently had sociology programmes over the period of 2008-2018. In the UK[1], 22 universities were selected at random from 102 institutions listed by the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2021). Utilizing publicly available curriculum documents for the academic year 2019/2020 that were available from institutional websites, we focussed on the broad characteristics of a) research methods and analysis courses, b) sociological theories, c) thematic sociologies, and d) local/regional sociology and global sociology. An inductive qualitative content analysis was used to identify overall patterns or characteristics within the content (Mayring, 2014).

[1] Given the differences in degree structure between Scotland on the one hand, and England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the other, no Scottish institutions were included in the analysis.

The two institutional cases in each country were then chosen to specifically examine the experience of the RTN. These institutions were characterized by their relatively high position in international university rankings[2]. Mclean et al. (2013) suggest that more prestigious institutions facilitate abstract thinking beyond local perspectives, whereas lower-ranked universities tend to demonstrate a 'regionalisation' of knowledge by integrating more applied science in the curriculum. Opting for two higher-status, research-intensive institutions in this research allows for the examination of sociology in its singular form, while also helping to facilitate comparison. Invited through departmental advertisements and gatekeepers, a total of 38 face-to-face or online hour-long interviews were conducted by the first author with Norwegian ($N_{NO}$=12), Hungarian ($N_{HU}$=17) and English ($N_{EN}$=9) Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD students as detailed in **Table 1**. Given the sample size of 38 interviews across the three countries and the case-study nature of this research, there are issues of generalisability of findings and analysis of by student background. This is especially true given our approach to recruitment through departmental gatekeepers and adverts: we are more likely to have reached those more invested in their studies in general, especially given concerns in Hungary and England over students taking on part-time work (Freeman, 2023; Kocsis, 2020).

**[TABLE 1]**

The primary data collection was initially scheduled between February-July 2020, but was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with differing impact on the three cases.

[2] For the case selection, only English universities were approached given the divergence between the home-countries of the UK.

Although fieldwork in Norway and Hungary was cancelled in March 2020, most scheduled interviews were rearranged to take place online. In England, however, only one institution out of six approached granted access. As such, although the study originally planned to allow for juxtaposition of student and staff views, the coverage of the latter is not sufficient for meaningful analysis in Norway ($N_{NO}$=6) and especially England ($N_{EN}$= 3) (see Hordósy & Norris, 2022, for further discussion regarding the Hungarian staff context). Therefore, while we allude to the overall themes from this analysis as relevant, the Norwegian and English staff interviews cannot be considered exhaustive. Regardless, three key issues are explored in relation to staff and student experiences of the nexus. First, how they conceptualise sociology as a discipline; second, how they see the broader sociological community and their place in it; and third, how they understand sociological research.

The research project received ethical approval from the host institution's departmental ethics board and all interview excerpts were anonymized. The interview data were transcribed verbatim using either paid transcription services or a combination of natural language-processing software followed by manual checks. The Hungarian-language interviews are analysed in the original language, translating extracts for publication. The authors employed inductive thematic analysis (Clark et al., 2021) following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This was facilitated by NVivo (Mortelmans, 2025). The analysis encompassed a six-stage process, including familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, review of themes, definition of themes, and supporting these themes with relevant data. As part of this analytical process, three issues emerged as focal points of interest with respect to the RTN. This included: being and becoming a researcher (and a teacher, in staff

accounts); motivation for conducting sociological research; and practices of sociological research (e.g. who sets agendas, what the sociological research process is, and the aims of sociological research). This drew our attention to the tensions that exist between the well-rehearsed collectivising aims of the Bologna Process and the general fragmentation of sociology that has variously been reported by Holmwood and others (2009, 2014).

## Results

The results focus on three interrelated aspects of the research/teaching nexus in sociology. First, we discuss how the curriculum is impacted by broader political and financial constraints. Second, we show the importance of the 'goods of sociology' in student experiences, including practical methodological skills, expertise in subject area, and theoretical understanding. Third, we examine the role of research praxis through curricular and extracurricular opportunities that exist with the wider sociological community.

### *Broader structural concerns and their impact on curriculum*

Documentary analysis revealed that there are important similarities in how sociology BA students are taught across the three cases. The triad of theory, method and thematic sociologies is central, with more generic and foundational courses positioned earlier in the degree and specialised knowledge and skills taught at later stages. For instance, research methods and analysis courses are compulsory and are offered during first and second years of study, the key difference being whether qualitative and quantitative approaches are integrated or taught separately. More specialised research methods / analysis courses are also offered in the final years, with students expected to work on their capstone research projects. Given these similarities, the key issues that impacted on the curriculum raised by interviewees related to a) the broader political and financial context, and b) institutional practice concerning student engagement and progression.

Concerns around the wider societal role of sociology and current political hostilities were mentioned in both Hungary and England, as '*at various times in [more senior*

*colleagues'] careers sociology was kind of under attack and that there was a risk that governments would not support, and therefore universities would not support, the expansion of sociology, or even the continuation in some cases*' (Eve, senior academic, England). The perceived and real[3] hostility towards social sciences in Hungary can have an impact on research directions even at early stages of careers. Politically sensitive topics might prompt self-censorship with researchers staying away from highly politicised topics, as highlighted by Eszter: *'if it becomes public what you're writing your doctorate about, then certain segments of the media will simply seize upon it and start a discrediting campaign'* (Eszter, PhD student, Hungary).

These broader political issues were also perceived to shape constraints on university funding and any related concern for pedagogy and curriculum, as Emese discussed:

> *After the Bologna-system […] as Hungary has a normative funding system based on the number of students, and every [other consideration does] no longer exist, just the state support based on student-quota; (...) the only chance for survival is to admit many students and this is possible on the BA program. (Emese, senior academic, Hungary)*

Several interviewees in both the Hungarian and the Norwegian cases also reflected on Bologna-era changes that coincided with larger student numbers entering at BA level. To manage large cohorts of undergraduate students and to induct students into sociological practice, the first year often covers *'introduction lectures to millions of professions [and thematic sociologies]'* (Médea, senior academic, Hungary). Botond

[3] See for instance attacks on the Central European University, gender studies, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or listing of NGOs, journalists and social scientists by media linked to the Hungarian government (Kováts and Rónay, 2021).

(BA student, Hungary) suggested that this was initially a real concern of pedagogy for him: '*it was such a slap in the face, that we sat in a lecture halls [more than a hundred of us], and then someone talked dryly for an hour and a half, and didn't think it's "übergáz" [very problematic]*'. Large group settings allowed little space for a nuanced engagement with staff research, which was perceived to create a barrier between research and teaching. As Clare (BA student, England) suggested, *'I think of [academics] very much as teachers over researchers, just because that's the side of them that I see'.* This perceived distance between students on the one hand, and researchers, research practices and research outcomes on the other, can be interpreted as a key dysfunction of the link between research and teaching (Trowler & Wareham, 2007).

Further, the large introductory theoretical, methodological and thematic sociologies also meant that the constructive alignment between curriculum and delivery was compromised. Eirik discussed the pedagogical concerns a lack of 'clear progression' and connections across courses meant in a BA programme:

> *It's just lots of topics piled together, introduction of this and that; (...) then they would do a course in the classics of sociology, (...) on social theory, which is fine. But then comes the methods courses, [so] they do that a little bit late, and it also makes it impossible for the other topics to assume the students know the methods, which means that all the texts have to be on a little bit lower level. (Eirik, senior academic, Norway)*

Interviewees also stated institutional policy regarding student engagement and progression influenced degree content and organisation. For example, increasing

pressure for employability outcomes were seen to prompt curricular changes that aimed to provide a clearer set of learning outcomes in the form of practical skills and competences. This moved curricula beyond the more obviously understood, but potentially less applicable, theoretical knowledge. In Hungary practical methodological competencies were provided early in the degree, as Adél outlined:

> *(...) we send them out into the field very early, we teach them to interview very early. (...) They should feel that it is a skill, they have just learned to interview, or they have just learned to interpret data using [statistical software]. (...) So they have the knowledge that leads to tangible results, which can be added to their CV. You can't write, "Hey, now I understand what I'm reading," or "I can compare different points of view". (Adél, junior/mid-career academic, Hungary)*

The key aim was to provide tangible skills and knowledge relevant for future employment, alongside less tangible critical thinking skills. However, some students also saw these competences helping to inform their future sociological selves. As Lóránt (BA student, Hungary) remarked, university-level sociological knowledge had a defining transformative role for him through participatory sociological methods in particular: *'my way of thinking changed, the topic remained the same, the subject remained the same, but everything around me changed'.*

*Motivation through the 'goods of sociology'*

In all three national contexts interviewees talked about the nature of powerful sociological knowledge as a sociological 'good' that had the potential to be transformative. Indeed, the practical applicability of sociological theories and methodological approaches offered students clearly defined, marketable skills, *and* a

more profound understanding of social issues and problems. These distinctly sociological understandings and skills are what we term ‘the goods of sociology’ - and these ‘goods’ were often connected to employment or volunteering they were already doing or were aspiring to do. For example, Linnea talked about the areas she could imagine herself working in, recognising the clear applicability of the knowledge and skills she gained:

> *I think for me it's important to find a job where I can use my analytical skills and where I can also work in the field I'm interested in, for instance in [researching] youth and social inequality. So within the public services would be good, like within the government in some kind of way. (Linnea, MA student, Norway)*

Eszter also discussed how she made good use of more specific methodological skills from her 5-year MA working in a non-governmental organisation prior to starting her PhD:

> *If I have to say one thing, it is (...) research methodology that I really took away from sociology. Whether it's quantitative, i.e. questionnaire design, or the very minimal [statistical software skills] that I use to get by in life, which is much more than most people have. But mostly, it was qualitative interviews and focus groups. (Eszter, PhD student, Hungary)*

The early introduction of research methods units meant students often felt students gained some level of expertise, for instance to be able to critique bad examples of survey-designs, as discussed in Norway. Clare also recognised the opportunities that methodological expertise could offer: *‘I have so much power, all of this information at your fingertips, fiddling around with it to see, to find relationships’* (Clare, MA student, England). Chances to practice and develop these ‘goods’ were also highlighted

positively. Róza (BA student, Hungary), for example, discussed her initial enjoyment of quantitative analysis courses, gaining experience and confidence through conducting interviews to feel more comfortable with a broader range of methods.

Unfortunately, due to cost constraints there are limits to the amount and types of theoretical, conceptual, methodological and practical 'goods' of sociology that can be delivered. Lilly found this whilst comparing notes with a colleague who did their MA at a different institution. She realised that she had not been taught about qualitative data analysis software, where researchers '*will use [NVivo] to compile things into categories, and I've not even been introduced to it?!'* (Lilly, MA student, England).

But regardless of the inequalities of opportunity, students were generally appreciative of the transformative potential of sociological practice. For Gréta (MA student, Hungary) the transformation was instant as she started her masters having studied a different subject before: *'[sociology] teaches me to think, to see the world with different eyes: it's not just that I read and accept things as they are written, but I also look at them critically, ask questions about why this is so, and what the effect of this is'*. Similarly, Annie discussed how she felt empowered in everyday discussions through applying key sociological concepts and subject knowledge:

> *Doing sociology gives you the tools when you're having a discussion with someone to have a bit more of a basis for your opinion, rather than just saying "this is my opinion, because it's my opinion". (...) It just changes your outlook on certain things, for example, someone saying to you "oh, crime is a social construct…" - I wouldn't even have thought about that, (…) because you're never… The media doesn't ever say that. (Annie, BA student, England)*

Recognizing the ‘goods of sociology’ became crucial in perceiving the discipline’s applicability, particularly for those not pursuing a research career. This encompassed personal transformation, critical thinking, and a readiness to question and actively engage with sociological concepts, ultimately resulting in a more expansive and insightful outlook on different facets of working environments and everyday life. As Lívia suggested:

> *On the one hand, these last three years have been difficult, because a huge question mark has been placed on even more issues. So, I don't think there is anything that I wouldn't immediately question. But it was very good for me to see everything as part of a wider system. (...) Of course, I haven't abolished segregation in my own village yet, but the three years were very good for me to delve into all these things. (Lívia, BA, Hungary)*

Developing the skills and competences associated with sociological method *and* the development of a sociological imagination were interlinked within an emergent research praxis. The next section explores this issue further to examine the role contact between staff and students, and the importance of in acquiring personal experience of research practice.

*The role of research in sociological futures*

As already suggested, research-related opportunities within the curriculum tended to commence early, usually with a form of data collection that utilized social science research methods. This provided a foundation to then begin to interpret data, and in the form of producing knowledge claims, progresses towards a capstone, dissertation

project. However, due to the concerns around the fragmented nature of the curriculum, some emphasised the issues students faced in seeing the overall thread throughout their studies prior to their capstone projects. Blanka said she *'tried many different research methods, but [courses] only lasted for half a year and I have not seen any continuation of them'* (BA student, Hungary). This meant methodological knowledge often remained compartmentalised. Indeed, the lack of integrative space[4] in the curriculum to bring the 'goods of sociology' together remained a concern for some academics:

> *[One of my dissertation supervisees told me] that they only now understood what sociology is for, because they studied [statistical software] and studied Durkheim, and they studied social history, but that they never, anywhere, put together what it was good for. How can these partial knowledges be utilized, how can they be connected, and how will sociology make sense? (Ivett, senior academic, Hungary)*

However, looking back on their university time, final year BA, MA and PHD students generally understood and appreciated how these elements were directed towards conducting independent research, as Noémi outlined:

> *I felt that the first year was really a foundation year [to] get a taste of everything. See what the legal background of sociology is, then, mathematically, which will prepare you for research. (...) And then I saw that in the second year we (...) really studied research methodology [and] we really established the theoretical background of sociology, who the great sociologists were. So I feel that there was a very strong, on the one hand, how to process literature, and on the*

[4] This is a particular concern in the Hungarian case due to the aforementioned Bologna-changes from 5-year degrees to BA and MA cycles still keeping a curriculum that operates with small credit weighting and a large number of courses per semester.

> *methodology of research. These two directions were also heading in the same direction, so that there would be no problems with the [dissertation[5]], that we gain a little knowledge in the world of research. (Noémi, BA student, Hungary)*

Students leveraged their strengths in methodologies, chose topics, and employed conceptual tools to explore research areas aligned with their interests and passions. Gábor (Hungary, PhD) discussed how his initial BA research in social history *'matured into a bit of a profession'* through becoming *'a little explorer of science, going into old musty buildings, just to find [things] out'* via *'rolling the [documentary evidence] on microfilm, and there was this really romantic part of it'*. Regarding the production of sociological knowledge, both *process* (employing the 'goods of sociology'), outputs (research reports, conference papers, or dissertations), and broader networks of sociologists were key. These elements created the integrative space that aided the 'alignment between students' personal projects and the focus of disciplinary knowledge' that allowed for transformative university transitions (Ashwin et al., 2014: 231). Sociological role models and networks helped students to envisage integration into the wider disciplinary community, gain validation for their knowledge claims, and to chart their possible sociological careers. The extracurricular fieldwork he took on as a student researcher impacted greatly Lóránt's motivation:

> *We were doing fieldwork [in small settlements] with [our lecturers]; [they] were so direct, that's how we saw them function as people, and we did research in the process. And somehow it showed that the university doesn't have to be an alienating thing, because here, through personal relationships, you can find*

[5] The Hungarian term for BA and MA dissertations is "szakdolgozat", whereas PhD thesis is "disszertáció".

> *motivation and focus, which then provides much more than [advanced quantitative data analysis course]. (Lóránt, BA student Hungary)*

Research-related extracurricular activities played a pivotal role in fostering motivation, providing exemplary models, and offering support for future career development and skill enhancement for students. Although Samu was a first-year student when he joined a research team, his colleagues were *'very open to my thoughts and ideas, they didn't measure competence in terms of cultural capital'*, giving his *'professional confidence a little boost'* (Samu, BA student, Hungary). Similarly, Mia's original role was to transcribe interviews. However, the early career researcher overseeing her role enabled her to conduct some of the analysis, leading to publications and motivation to enter a PhD:

> *I was employed to do some transcriptions. (…) honestly, it was a huge opportunity. We got several conferences with the paper, we're currently publishing it. I got very lucky meeting the right person, at the right time. (...) My colleague was amazing, we really kind of connected on an academic level. (Mia, PhD, England)*

It was particularly noticeable in the Hungarian case that students and staff also discussed the opportunities and pitfalls of research-related extracurricular activities. Students who were engaged in such activities often found motivation for their dissertation as well as sociological futures; felt more connected and grounded within the discipline; and gained valuable skills, competences, and 'insider' knowledge. Bernard highlighted how key contacts were instrumental in helping him navigate the otherwise opaque world of research and on to PhD study:

> *I met people that I was working with and [they] sort of brought me along and sort of showed me the ropes. So we started working together and I became [their], I guess, mentee / Research Assistant / sort of a lot of different things at the same time. [My role] became a mixture of many different things, like overseeing other people that [they] brought onto the project. Trying to get funding. Just all kinds of different things. (Bernard, PhD, Norway)*

Students linked their knowledge *about* the research of academics to the closeness that was allowed in later stages of their BA programmes. For instance, Andræs' experience in his *'second or third year it's been a much, much closer [to academics], (...) because it's a lot more seminars and a lot more close knit lectures'* (BA student, Norway). Annie also discussed an invitation to work with one of the academics through her engagement with sociology seminars:

> *The [academics] I have a bit more of like a personal relationship with, I know maybe what they are researching. So one [person] for example, I'm doing something with [them] outside of university, so I know about [their] research area more because I'm involved in it. … So [they] used to do this thing called [name of research] project, (...) [they are] basically arguing there's a lot of flaws within that [socio-political] system. (...) We were basically researchers, kind of, so just really like looking over all the cases with like a microscope. (Annie, BA student, England)*

However, the funding of research-related extracurricular participation was a concern in all three countries. From a student perspective, pressures to supplement maintenance funds via paid employment unrelated to social science research can hamper more in-depth experiences of sociological work. This is often compromised

further when staff-student networks are distant. In both Hungary and in Norway, students discussed opportunities they had to join academics on research projects – and these were often very limited. Linnea contacted a researcher about a research assistant role *'one hour after [an email] was sent out and then it was already booked*' (MA student, Norway). In Hungary, potential opportunities for research assistants were often circulated amongst students who staff perceived to be more engaged in seminar and class discussions. However, as another student noted, this was often accompanied by the instruction to pass the opportunity to anyone who might be interested: *'they always write at the end that if we know of anyone else who we think would be interested in this, we can pass it on; I don't think it's closed because they want to exclude others from it, but because they're trying to convey these things to people who would be interested in it'* (Róza, BA student, Hungary).

While these opportunities were well intentioned, their limited and happenstance nature inevitably meant that not everyone could participate, and it is likely that perceptions of interested and engaged students will be patterned by socio-economic background (see Clark and Hordósy, 2019). Indeed, many staff pointed to the problem of funding constraints and the time pressures on research and teaching roles. This often meant less opportunities for integrating a broader and larger group of students into their available research projects.

## Discussion

This paper makes three key points about the research/teaching nexus in relation to the sociological practice of staff and students. First, there are similar concerns over the curriculum and student experiences across Norway, Hungary and England. These

relate to the structural, financial and sometimes political constraints on pedagogy, and to the sequencing and balance of curriculum structure with respect to social theory, thematic sociology and research methods. Second, 'the goods of sociology' - sociological skills, broader competences, and an emergent sociological imagination – can became intertwined in students' fledging research practices and reflect the potentially transformative nature of the discipline. These 'goods' can drive their motivation to do sociology and help to develop plans for future career journeys. Third, the results suggest that knowing about academics' research practices, *as well as* other interests and activities is seen as broadly motivating to students and the formation of their possible sociological futures (Hordósy et al., 2025). Personal relationships with sociologists who are research active are perceived to be key in encouraging continuing progression and career guidance, because they help scaffold student learning and enable them to feel part of a broader sociological community. It is within these aspects of community that a space can be found for the fragmented and compartmentalised elements of sociological knowledge that might otherwise limit continuing engagement.

Taken together, these points demonstrate the value of connecting sociological research and teaching within the personal experiences of staff and students. To be able to produce sociological knowledge claims, the research process, outputs, and broader networks of sociologists were key. When this was combined with an integrative research practice – whether through project work within the curriculum, capstone research, or research-related extracurricular engagement – it allowed for a connection between research and teaching that was motivating and viewed positively by students.

Of course, such integrative spaces are also time-dependent; academics' time in both Hungary and England was under pressure from large teaching loads and/or a focus on research outputs (Alpár et al., 2019). If anything, such pressures have grown since data-collection. In Hungary, large-scale changes to university governance have shifted funded student places away from older, established institutions (that also often host sociology courses) towards a government-sanctioned newer institution (ADF, 2025; Kováts and Rónay, 2021). In England (and more broadly, the UK) the university funding crisis at the time of writing threatens a wide range of institutions and subjects with redundancies and restructures, as well as attempts to make 'efficiency' savings through reducing 'unfunded' research time, further entrenching existing inequalities and the divide between research and teaching.

In many ways, these findings correspond with Holmwood's (2014: 649) idea that the core of sociological practice is not to be found in concepts, categories, and methods, but is instead characterised by a particular sensibility. This sensibility is a significant part of the sociological imagination – and the collective outcome of the 'goods of sociology' can be characterised by what Holmwood terms as a particular 'dissensus'. Lívia, Gréta, and Annie all allude to this sensibility in highlighting how sociology teaches them to see the world in a different way; that is, to move beyond psychological individualism and 'to see everything as part of a wider system'.

But this outcome cannot simply be assumed as a necessary product of greater regulation, as might be assumed by the more bureaucratic elements of post-Bologna processes (Gibb and Iacovidou, 2004). Instead, it is developed through personal engagements with research practice that create and maintain a sociological sense of

self. This is to say that the value of sociology is dependent on putting sociological knowledge into practice. Indeed, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that closing the alignment between the research/teaching nexus allows both students and staff to shape this sensibility of 'dissensus' around local needs and conditions. This can then enable what Holmwood (2009: 1.1) and others have described as 'a provincialised sociology' - a sociology that is shared in its purpose, but also one that recognises 'the different local contexts from which global interconnections and comparisons might be addressed'.

Evidently, there are inevitable tensions for sociologists who have an interest in examining structural constraints within society but are required to work within HEIs that are a product of those conditions. The growing emphasis on remote learning, increasing class sizes, and the encroachment of employability into curricula make it ever more difficult for academics to close the gaps between research and teaching. At best, the response so far has been to provide a critique of these circumstances while emphasising the value of sociological *research* within an increasingly commodified and bureaucratic higher education sector. However, as the evidence in this paper demonstrates, there is likely to be additional value in paying greater attention to the research/teaching nexus and the role of sociology graduates in wider society. To use Holmwood's terminology, sociology does not just 'export' concepts and academics into other disciplines. It also exports graduates back into society where they 'see the world with different eyes'. To date, there has been little examination of what this might mean beyond a university context and how, exactly, sociological practice helps to shape their personal and professional lives. There is evidence here to suggest that such work would be worthwhile.

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## Ethics statement

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## Table

***Table 1:*** *Student and staff participants by case-study country and university level*

| | ENGLAND | HUNGARY | NORWAY | TOTAL BY LEVEL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BACHELOR'S | 5 | 10 | 4 | 19 |
| MASTER'S | 2 | 1 | 5 | 8 |
| PHD | 2 | 6 | 3 | 11 |
| TOTAL STUDENT BY COUNTRY | 9 | 17 | 12 | 38 |
| TOTAL STAFF BY COUNTRY | 3 | 21 | 6 | 30 |