

Student Dissertations in Artistic Topics at the University of Debrecen between 1914 and 1949

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Abstract: Some of the most easily examined markers of the activities of university lecturers in any period are the number, topic and result of works written under their supervision. Therefore, a research has been done in the Manuscript Archive of the Library of Humanities and Natural Sciences of the University and National Library at the University of Debrecen. The results are summarised in this presentation. The statements are made by taking into consideration all of the dissertations written by students in Humanities between 1914 and 1949. This work had two basic parts. On the one hand, since it was not possible to read the dissertations that are no longer available in the archives, I could work only with their accessible data. On the other hand, I thoroughly studied the dissertations found in the archive, as well as read and analysed the related professorial evaluations. I will present the genre, subject and number of these dissertations.

Keywords: University of Debrecen, professors and students, competition essays, teacher dissertations, PhD theses, artistic topics

1. Competition essays, teacher dissertations, PhD theses

Some of the most easily examined markers of the activities of university lecturers in any period are the number, topic and result of works written under their supervision. Therefore, a research² has been done in the Manuscript Archive of the Library of Humanities and Natural Sciences of the University and National Library at the University of Debrecen. The results are summarised in this study. The statements are made by taking into consideration all of the dissertations written by students in Humanities between 1914 and 1949. However, not every volume³ summarising the basic data of the Manuscript Archive's dissertations can be found in this collection. Therefore, this work had two basic parts. On the one hand, since it was not possible to read the dissertations that are no longer available in the archives, I could work only with their accessible data – title, author, name of the examiner (if known), grade and date of submission. On the other hand, I thoroughly studied the dissertations found in the archive, as well as read and analysed the related (and still available) professorial evaluations.⁴ Fig. 1 below presents the genre, subject and number of dissertations in artistic topics written by students in Humanities between 1914 and 1949.

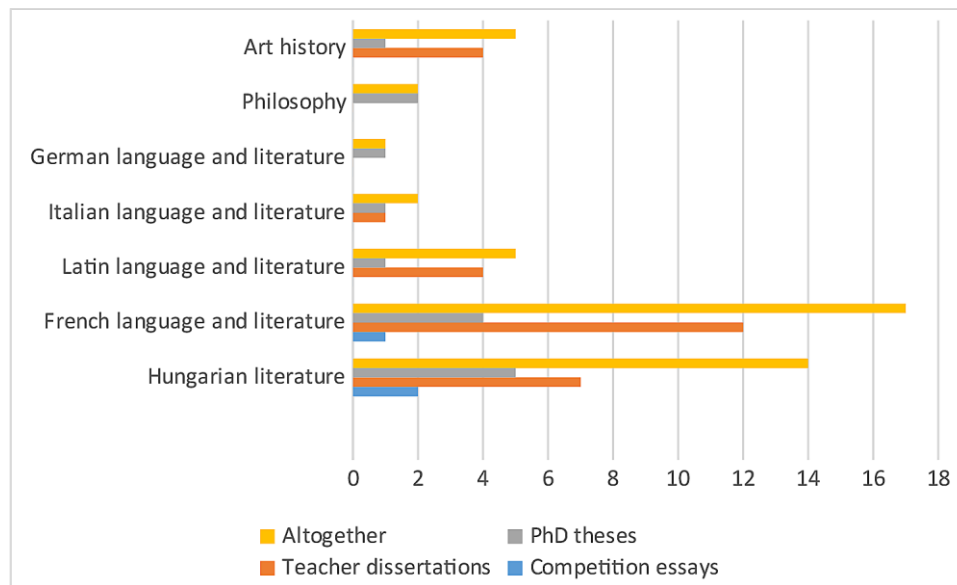
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2 This study is one chapter of the author's PhD thesis in progress which is titled *The Artistic, Art Theoretical and Art Supporting Activities of Professors Teaching at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Debrecen 1914-1949*.

3 László Módis (1955, ed.) A Debreceni Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem könyvtárának évkönyve 1954. 2. rész. Kézirat [The Yearbook of the Library of the Kossuth Lajos University in Debrecen 1954. Part 2. Manuscript] – A Debreceni Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Karához benyújtott pályamunkák, tanári szakdolgozatok és doktori értekezések bibliográfiája 1914–1950. [Bibliography of the Competition Essays, Teacher Dissertations and PhD Theses Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Debrecen 1914-1950] DE ENK BTK és TTK Kézirattára

4 The PhD theses not available in the Manuscript Archive can be found in the University and National Library at the University of Debrecen.

Figure 1. Student dissertations in artistic topics written at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Debrecen by genre and subject between 1914 and 1949

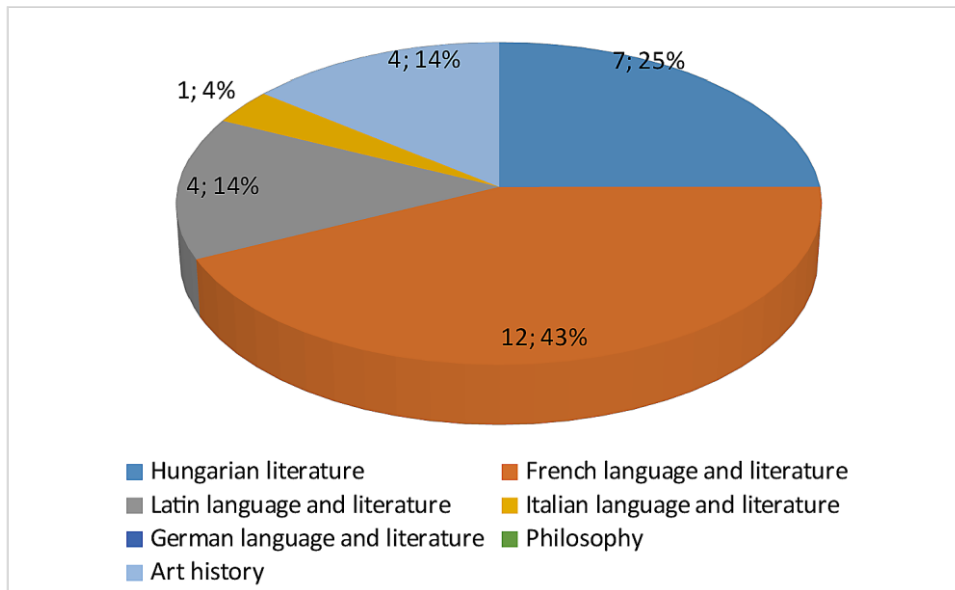


Source: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168., ed. Tamusné Molnár, 2015

Out of all the dissertations in Humanities written in artistic topics between 1914 and 1949 (46), 28 are teacher dissertations and 15 are PhD theses. 6 dissertations were further developed into theses in the same or similar topics, out of which 3 were competition essays in their earliest form. In the course of the research, I wanted to find out what aspects were considered in dissertation writing at that time, what routine students had in this, how much help they could expect from their professors, and whether their topic choices reflected on the content of the popular and less popular courses that they attended at the university. I was also curious to know whether I would find a correlation between the dissertation topics proposed by professors mediating artistic contents and their educational practices – namely, whether artistic-aesthetic titles appeared at professors teaching in such course, and whether the majority of students in such topics wrote their dissertations with the supervision of these professors. I investigated the aspects of evaluation, and the basis on which the dissertations were graded by their examiners.

Most of the dissertations in artistic topics were written on French language (37%) and Hungarian literature (31%), significantly less on Latin language and Art history (10-10%), 2 were written on Italian language and Philosophy, respectively (5-5%), and 1 on German language (2%). This proportion proves our research results so far – among the academics of the Faculty of Humanities, artistic contents appeared mostly in the university educational activities of professors János Hankiss and Károly Pap, and therefore, they offered the highest number of dissertation topics in such topics. The submitted works are mainly teacher dissertations (61%), and PhD theses (34%), and by comparison, the number of competition essays is negligible (5%). The genre distribution of the dissertations mirrors the fact that for students, the successful completion of the dissertation was compulsory in order to become lecturers, while a PhD research was not, and thus, significantly less students wrote PhD theses. Few students undertook the writing of competition essays since the titles of the proposed competition topics were close only to a few students.

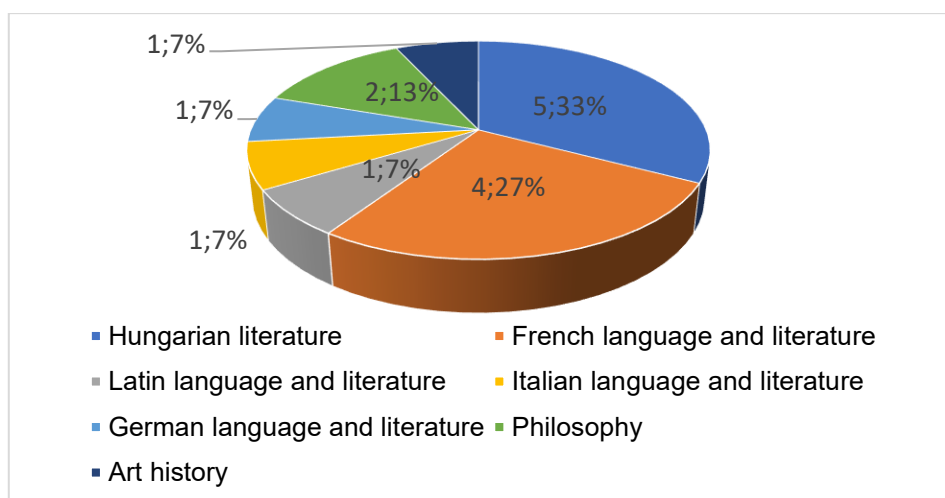
Figure 2. Teacher dissertations in artistic topics written at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Debrecen between 1914 and 1949



Source: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168., ed. Tamusné Molnár, 2015

Seven teacher dissertations were written on Hungarian literature, the examiner was Károly Pap in all cases. Twelve teachers wrote dissertations on French language and literature. The examiner was János Hankiss in all cases. Four teacher dissertations were written on Latin language and literature – two of them were examined by Nándor Láng, one by Jenő Darkó and another one by Lajos Bessenyei. One teacher candidate wrote a dissertation on Italian language and literature with the examination of Gaetano Trombatore, and a graduate teacher wrote a PhD thesis. His name was Oszkár Wallisch, he later became a lecturer in Italian at the university and an active lecturer in artistic and art history topics at the Debrecen Summer University. Four students wrote professorial dissertations in Art history, out of which three were examined by Nándor Láng, and one by István Járdányi-Paulovics.

Figure 3. PhD theses in artistic topics written at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Debrecen between 1914-1949



Source: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168., ed. Tamusné Molnár, 2015

Five PhD theses were written on Hungarian literature – the examiners are not indicated. Two dissertations were further developed from competition essays into theses. Four PhD theses were written on French language and literature (the supervisors are not indicated). Three dissertations were turned into PhD theses. The author of one dissertation was the student who developed the competition essay on French language and literature first into a dissertation, then into a PhD thesis – its topic and title remained the same, only the language of the work changed (the competition essay and the PhD thesis are in Hungarian, while the dissertation is in French). An interesting fact about dissertations on Latin language and literature is that under the supervision of Jenő Darkó, Magda Szabó⁵, who later became a well-known and frequently translated author, defended her professorial dissertation as a PhD thesis as well. Apart from her, no one did a PhD research in an artistic topic in this subject. One person – Ágota Szentpéteri Kun, daughter of the law professor Béla Szentpéteri Kun – obtained a PhD in Art history. In German language and literature, one person obtained a PhD with a thesis in an artistic topic. Finally, two people wrote PhD art history theses in philosophy.

2. Distribution of dissertations by topic

We set thematic units among the dissertations, regardless of the subjects, on the basis of topic' similarities.⁶ These are the following:

- theatre and film arts (altogether: 20, investigated: 13)
- civilization and art history eras, styles and works of art (altogether: 14, investigated: 9)
- ancient thinkers and arts, relationship between antiquity and beauty (altogether: 5, investigated: 4)
- features of artists and artistic branches, art theory, aesthetics (altogether: 7, investigated: 5)

I examined and sought to analyse the dissertations still available in the Manuscript Archive and in the Main Collection, according to the title, the author, the examiner, the grade, the date of submission, and the content. I found tables of contents, declaration of authenticity, descriptions and evaluations of basic examination in some dissertations, while others contained only the dissertation – thus, their description cannot be equally detailed. In the dissertations, which contained evaluations, I could determine the criteria for assessment presumably used by the examiner. Moreover, since these criteria did not exist officially at that time, we can see what necessary conditions the works had to meet before one could become a teacher. These criteria could be: the efficiency of data collection, the stage of processing – proportion of description and analysis, language skills and their application: grammar, spelling, structure – layout of research material, statistical statements, use of literature and of sources – quality of references, quotations and style. The texts of the written evaluations consider these aspects. The grades given by the examiner are also diverse – most of the investigated dissertations were assessed by János Hankiss and Károly Pap. Hankiss gave lower grades more often than his colleague, he even gave an unsatisfactory grade once. Nonetheless, it is always much more challenging to write a paper in a foreign language than in one's mother tongue – in our case, the ones in French are the weaker dissertations, and Hankiss mainly criticises deficiencies regarding linguistic skills and their applications or major mistakes. As for typical mistakes, we can mention the insufficient processing or analysis of the collected data, or too little independence during the research.

⁵ In her spirituality, Magda Szabó remained loyal in her entire life to her beloved home and school town, Debrecen. She wrote about the memories of her school years and life spent here in several works. The start of her literary career and public life was linked to this town too, since in 1937, the author Gábor Oláh introduced the then early career writer to the Csokonai Kör among the new poets of Debrecen. (Bakó, 1986, 347.)

⁶ Works with the same author and with the same or similar title and topic, which were further developed from one form into another, were counted separately (e.g. competition essay → dissertation → PhD thesis).

3. Overall results of dissertations in Humanities

The examiners can be regarded as data only in the case of dissertations since the topic announcers of competition essays and PhD theses are not indicated. It is a striking fact that, as mentioned before, most of the dissertations in artistic-aesthetic topics were evaluated by János Hankiss, followed by Károly Pap. Other university professors and lecturers – Nándor Láng, Jenő Darkó, István Járdányi-Paulovics and Gaetano Trombatore – led only a few or one teacher candidate into the artistic world during the graduation process. This fact suggests that although significantly more lecturers taught artistic-aesthetic studies, they might have wished to use these contents mostly in their scholarly activities or the education of teacher candidates.

In the examined period, altogether 3403 dissertations were written in Humanities, out of which 143 were competition essays⁷, 2750 were teacher dissertations and 510 were PhD theses. Only 46 out of the 3403 focused on artistic topics, which is slightly more than 1%. The statistical figures show that, though it is an important area (the artistic-aesthetic activities of lecturers in Humanities deriving from scholarly and personal interests between 1914 and 1949), it is quantitatively negligible when considering the entire operation of the Faculty of Humanities. Furthermore, this impact had a possible lasting effect at the time of university studies only in the case of a few people.⁸ After graduation, life-long artistic impact can be pointed out only in the case of a few teacher candidates since we are not aware of any 'follow-up study' made from this perspective.

Table 1. All Student Dissertations Written at the Faculty of Humanities of The University of Debrecen between 1914 and 1949

Competition Essay	Professorial Dissertation	PhD Thesis	Altogether
143	2750	510	3403

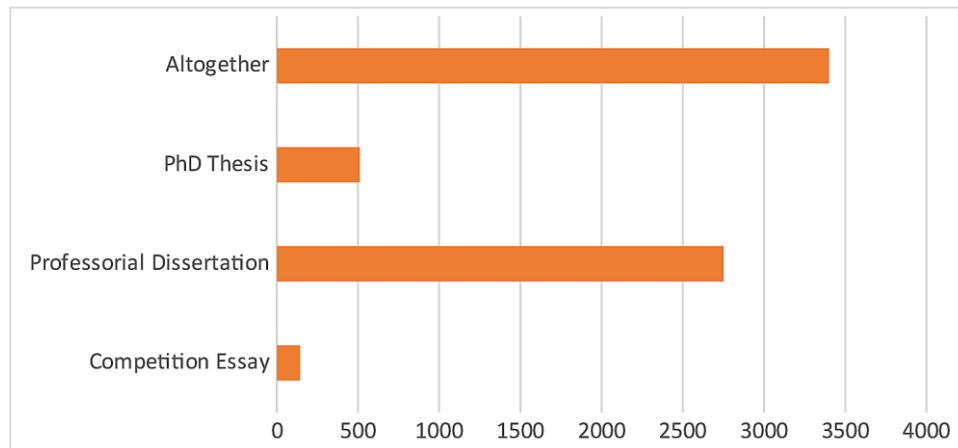
Source: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168., ed. Tamusné Molnár, 2015

Fig. 4 shows the data presented in table 1 as well, and it gives a good picture of the proportion that competition essays, teacher dissertations and PhD theses in each genres represent in the total number of the dissertations.

⁷ The number of the competition essays does not agree with the data published by József Mudrák. I accessed this data by counting the dissertations published in the university yearbook used as a primary source. See: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168.

⁸ In addition to the new supplies of scholars, the main task of the contemporary Faculty of Humanities was the training of secondary school teachers. Then, the principle of the universities' academic liberty caused anarchic conditions, the strict order of the Teacher Training Institute oriented rather towards the teaching practice. Art history and aesthetics had a highly peripheral role in these. (Based on the publication of Dr. József Mudrák.)

Figure 4. All student dissertations written at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Debrecen by genre between 1914 and 1949



Source: KLTE évkönyve [KLTE yearbook], 1955. 1–168., ed. Tamusné Molnár, 2015

The percentage distribution of the dissertations written in the three genres is clearly visible in fig. 4 – the 2750 teacher dissertations represent the majority of all the dissertations in Humanities, 80,81%, the 510 PhD theses represent 14,99%, while the 143 competition essays represent 4,20%.

4. Conclusions

I strived to investigate, classify and analyse the dissertations in Humanities both quantitatively and in terms of content considering certain aspects in order to find out whether the topics proposed by professors and lecturers and/or the topic choices of students mirror the artistic-aesthetic contents mediated by professors and lecturers. The following aspects were considered genres, the examiners and grades of the dissertations along with the topic choices and evaluation criteria. Therefore, I presented the number and genres of dissertations in Humanities written by students of the University of Debrecen between 1914 and 1949. It was important because I am convinced that the main research areas, subjects taught and the professors' publications have an impact on the topic choices and interests of their students. In some cases, successful competition essays were published. This study has pointed out that the highest number of dissertations by genre was written in the form of teacher dissertations, by subject on French language and literature, with the examination of professor János Hankiss, followed by Károly Pap, professor in Hungarian literary history. In the examined period, we cannot speak of a supervisor in the modern sense. Teacher candidates asked for and received titles and topic suggestions from the professors of their courses. However, the cooperation between the professor and the student did not go beyond this, since the aim of dissertations at that time was to show the extent to which students were able to do research independently, to explore and process the literature, to systematise, classify, and possibly evaluate the sources. For this reason, students did not ask for help in the course of dissertation writing. If someone had done so, their professor would have thought rightly that they were not suited to be teachers and researchers, since they could not deal with the chosen topic independently.⁹ The examiners, who were in most cases the recipients of the topics, read and evaluated the dissertations of their candidates for the first time only in their final form. Thus, they truly valued the students' work. Those who could not meet this requirement, paid others to write their dissertations, and even their PhD theses.¹⁰ There were no predetermined evaluation criteria. This

⁹ Based on the publication of Dr. Tamás Vincze.

¹⁰ This is confirmed by Endre Zibolen' in Tamás Vincze's dissertation. (Vincze, 2011, 100.)

would have deeply offended the professors' authority, they would have felt that their university professorial freedom and autonomy had been curtailed. Therefore, evaluations were highly subjective. The texts were either typed or written by hand, and expanded from a few sentences to a half or one page.

The announced competition topics¹¹ mostly mirrored the personal interests and tastes of the professors. In many cases, this also surfaced in the fact that the same competition topics were proposed for several years in a row, so students were not drawn to these topics, they felt distant. Successfully competition essays were usually accepted as dissertations. Dissertation topics covered a wide range for each professor. In general, these were not narrow topics but they treated, more comprehensive ones. For instance, Károly Pap often made his candidates discuss complete oeuvres of writers.¹² There were a number of unwritten rules which were to be complied with – however, sometimes these were also violated.¹³ The teacher dissertation was not a crucial work, it did not have to be defended in today's sense and according to today's practice. Students had to write and submit the work, and then receive the grade and evaluation. The dissertation as well as the PhD thesis were much rather 'entries' – their significance was not considerable compared to the oral exam. The supervisor was not a question either since there were one-man departments for a long time, and thus, there was no choice – students wrote their teacher dissertations and the ambitious ones completed their PhD theses with the professors of the given courses.¹⁴

The PhD theses submitted in a written form did not have such a significance as they have today. The thesis was mostly taken into consideration when it was related to some questions of the comprehensive examination. The emphasis of the oral exam was on the candidate's knowledge of their chosen main subject and two additional subjects. The submission and favourable evaluation of the PhD thesis (the candidates received the written form of the evaluation) were the preconditions for being eligible for the much more significant PhD comprehensive examination.

In the course of the research, I have concluded an unexpected statement – even though art theory and aesthetic courses were taught by the professors of the departments of philosophy and pedagogy and they were the ones who mainly discussed such contents in their works and classes, hardly any dissertations in artistic topics were written under their supervision. In philosophy, two PhD theses were completed in this area, but there was no pedagogical thesis – thus, the number of the PhD theses is negligible in comparison with the number of the other works. It may be due to the fact that when proposing topics professors dedicated the themes to subjects taught, and did not take into account their personal research interests in the process of awarding degrees. An additional reason might be that university students were not willing to undertake the investigation and research of these contents since this task required serious independence from them with minimal or rather no professorial assistance.

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11 1915-1949. See Mudrák, 2005, 41-56.

12 See László Kiss (1930), Ferenc Molnár; Imre Bagdi (1932) Endre Ady; József Fazekas (1932) Sándor Reményik's life and poetry; Endre Gaál (1932) Elek Benedek's life and literary oeuvre; Gabriella Koller (1932) Ferenc Móra.

13 For example, one of the unwritten rules was not to write a dissertation about a living person. Nonetheless, in Debrecen a dissertation was written, under the supervision of Károly Pap, on Gábor Oláh (1881-1942) while he was still alive. See András Nagy (1932): Gábor Oláh's life and poetry.

14 Based on the publication of Dr. Tamás Vincze.

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