

Profile of a Comparative and International Education Leader: Tamás Kozma

Author: Zoltán Györgyi and Magdolna Rébay

Abstract

Tamás Kozma is a prominent figure in Hungarian educational research, particularly in the field of the sociology of education. He began his career as a teacher, but his interests soon turned toward research activities. Initially, he worked in various research groups and institutes and later served as the director of the Institute for Educational Research (HIER). From 1994, he served at the University of Debrecen, where for many years he headed both the Department of Educational Sciences and the Doctoral Program in Educational Sciences. In each of these positions, he actively supported the research activities of the institutions he led and fostered the development of his colleagues' scholarly work. His professional interests are wide-ranging, but he has been particularly influential in the field of comparative research. He maintains extensive international professional networks and has served as a visiting professor at numerous universities around the world.

Keywords: Tamás Kozma, biography, Hungary, University of Debrecen, comparative education.



Tamás Kozma at the University of Debrecen (8 May 2024. Photo: Magdolna Rébay)

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Zoltán Györgyi, Budapest and Magdolna Rébay, University of Debrecen, Hungary

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Biography

Professor Tamás Kozma (born 1939) is a distinguished representative of Hungarian educational research. His professional career began as a schoolteacher. He obtained his primary teacher qualification while still completing his secondary education (1957). He subsequently studied theology, earning his first higher-education degree in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (1962). He continued his studies in education at József Attila University in Szeged, where he qualified as a secondary-school teacher (1967).

In the early phase of his career (1962–1968), he taught in schools in small settlements in eastern Hungary. Even at this stage he placed strong emphasis on scholarly work, which led to the award of a university doctoral degree (dr. univ.) in 1968. He later worked as an editor of *Köznevelés*, at the time the only Hungarian journal devoted to education policy. During this period, he defended his Candidate of Sciences (CSc) dissertation (1973). In the same year, he joined the Pedagogical Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which later became an independent institute and developed into one of the principal centres of educational sociology research in Hungary. He was awarded the Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (DSc) degree in 1986. From 1990 to 2000 he served as Director of the institute, which operated under the name Hungarian Institute for Educational Research (HIER) between 1982 and 2004. Following its reorganisation, he continued to support its work as a scientific adviser from 2007 until the late 2010s.

Professor Kozma's career in higher education began with teaching sociology of education. Following the publication of his pioneering textbook in 1975, he was invited to teach as a visiting lecturer at numerous higher-education institutions. In 1989 he was awarded the title of Honorary Professor at the University of Szeged. He completed his habilitation at what is now the University of Debrecen (then Kossuth Lajos University) in 1994, where he was appointed full professor and Head of the Department of Educational Sciences in 1995, a position he held until 2005. He played a key role in establishing the doctoral programme in educational sciences that is still in operation today, becoming its first director. Owing to cooperation between the doctoral programme and the Institute for Educational Research, training was provided for several years both in Debrecen and in Budapest. Under Kozma's supervision, 22 doctoral candidates obtained their PhD degrees.

Within the university, Professor Kozma also placed great emphasis on the organisation and management of educational research. To this end, in 2007 he founded the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD-Hungary), which coordinated the scholarly activities of the department and the doctoral programme, and of which he became the founding president. Alongside his work at the University of Debrecen, he also served as professor at Eszterházy Károly College in Eger between 2005 and 2009. Since 2009 he has held the title of Emeritus Professor at the University of Debrecen.

Professor Kozma has played an outstanding role in shaping Hungary's professional academic public life. As both an institute director and a university leader, he consistently sought to ensure that the results of educational research reached a wide audience. In 1992 he founded the journal *Educatio*, serving as its Editor-in-Chief, and he remains an active member of its editorial board to this day. The journal has become a major vehicle for high-quality educational sociology research in Hungary, while also publishing studies of value to educational governance and policy-making. Of particular note are the so-called *Mérleg (Review)* issues, published every four years in alignment with parliamentary elections, which analyse the social impact of the most significant education policy decisions taken during the preceding parliamentary cycle. The majority of Hungarian researchers engaged in educational research publish regularly in the journal.

In 2001 he founded the university book series *Pallas Debrecina*, of which he also became editor. He also co-launched further book series (*Társadalom és Oktatás [Education and Society]*) in collaboration with

leading Hungarian publishers (Új Mandátum, Gondolat). These series provide publication opportunities not only for staff of the institutes he led, but for a broad range of Hungarian educational researchers.

At the time of Hungary's political transition, he founded the Hungarian Educational Research Association (HERA) with the aim of promoting professional cooperation among researchers working in education in Hungary and, in part, beyond the country's borders. The association joined the European Educational Research Association (EERA) in 2012. According to data from 2026, it has 741 members. Its annual conferences (HUCER) have become one of the most important national forums for educational researchers. The association offers opportunities for publishing research both in Hungarian and in English through the HERA Yearbooks and also launched the quarterly, English-language *Hungarian Educational Research Journal* (HERJ), now published by Akadémiai Kiadó, which strengthens knowledge exchange between researchers in Hungary and abroad.

Professor Kozma's own research interests are primarily situated within the sociology of education and educational planning. Within these fields, he has focused in particular on organisational analysis in education, the emergence and effects of cultural disadvantage, educational issues affecting various minority groups, regional analysis, international comparisons of education systems, and the regional study of school and university networks.

A defining feature of his professional work is his close engagement with international developments in his field. Through his research and publications, he has channelled international findings into Hungarian academic discourse, while also disseminating his own research in foreign languages.

As a visiting professor, he has taught at universities in the following cities: Syracuse (USA, 1989), Chicago (1991), Honolulu (1994), Vilnius (1996), Berlin (Humboldt University, 2000), Reading (2002), Stockholm (2003), and Nottingham (2005).

He was one of the founders of CHER (Consortium of Higher Education Researchers) in 1990 and served as a member of its governing board from 1991 to 1995. He has also joined numerous other international academic organisations, including the International Sociological Association (1979) and the Comparative Education Societies of Europe (1983). From 1998 onwards, he served for many years as the Hungarian representative to the World Council of Comparative Education Societies.

His research output includes 72 published books (32 monographs and 40 edited books) and nearly 400 academic articles.

Major works:

- 1975: *Hátrányos helyzet [Disadvantage]*, Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó;
- 1985: *Tudásgyár?: Az iskola mint társadalmi szervezet [Knowledge Factory? The School as a Social Institution]*, Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó;
- 1992: *Ethocentrism in Education*. Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang (co-editor Klaus Schleicher);
- 1994: *Bevezetés a nevelésszociológiába [An Introduction to the Sociology of Education]*, Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó;
- 2002: *Határokon innen, határokon túl: Regionális változások az oktatásügyben, 1990–2000 [Within and Beyond Borders: Regional Educational Changes, 1990–2000]*, Budapest, Oktatáskutató Intézet, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó;
- 2004: *Kié az egyetem? A felsőoktatás nevelésszociológiája [Who Owns the University? Whose University? The Sociology of Higher Education]*, Budapest, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó;
- 2005: *Kisebbségi oktatás Közép-Európában [Minority Education in Central Europe]*, Budapest, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó.

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- 2006: *Az összehasonlító neveléstudomány alapjai* [Foundations of Comparative Education], Budapest, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó;
- 2008: *A bolognai folyamat Közép-Európában* [*The Bologna Process in Central Europe*], Budapest, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó (co-editor: Magdolna Rébay);
- 2011: *Az iskola térben és időben* [*Schools in Space and Time*], Budapest, Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó (co-author: Katalin R. Forray);
- 2022: *Innováció és tanulás* [*Innovation and Learning*], Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó.

Comparative Research in the Work of Tamás Kozma

For the educational sociologist Tamás Kozma, the path to comparative educational research was a long one. Along this path, we can identify four key milestones. The first was his international literature research at the National Pedagogical Library, which, for Kozma—who also engaged in pedagogical journalism and was proficient in German and English—provided a level of international knowledge that was far from common in communist Hungary (Kozma, 2011, p. 121). The second milestone was the professional relationship he developed with Lajosné Illés, head of the Library's Documentation and Comparative Pedagogy Department. In the 1980s, Illés was the editor of the series *Pedagogy and Current Issues Abroad* at the Tankönyvkiadó (the publisher of educational books), a project to which Kozma contributed (Kozma, 2011, p. 122). Illés was also a member of Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) and maintained close professional relations with its head, Wolfgang Mitter, with whom Kozma—like other German researchers, such as Jürgen Schriewer and Ulrich Teichler—later established a similarly close collaboration.

The third milestone was the IEA and UNESCO Summer University in Graenna in 1971. Hungary was, in fact, the first socialist country to participate in the IEA's achievement measurement studies, and participants—including Kozma—were trained for the project during this course. Through this project, Kozma came into contact with T. Neville Postlethwaite and Torsten Husén (Kozma, 2011, pp. 127–131; Kozma & Tózsér, 2012). The fourth milestone was his time at Syracuse University in 1989/90 as a Fulbright scholar, where he met Burton Clark, what later became truly significant for him. In the 1990s, Kozma's interest shifted to higher education research, a clear change given that his work as a sociologist of education had previously focused on the realm of public education (Kozma, 2011, pp. 195–199).

The political changes in Central Europe in 1989/90 facilitated the conduct of international research. A particularly favorable situation arose for Kozma after 1994 in Debrecen, near the Hungarian-Romanian border. As department head and doctoral program director, as well as director general of the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research (HIER), he initiated and led numerous comparative studies, as noted above. Thanks to the revitalization of professional networks, he could also rely on Hungarian minority researchers in neighboring countries. Below, we provide a brief overview of the comparative studies conducted under Kozma's leadership.

Between 1992 and 1995, the *Cross-Border Cooperation in Education: Comparative Regional Research* was conducted (cf. Kozma, 1993). In this project, Kozma distinguished between two characteristic forms of cross-border cooperation in Hungary and neighboring countries with significant Hungarian minorities: symbolic and instrumental cooperation. Symbolic cooperation was characterized by the use of education to strengthen Hungarian national identity, whereas in instrumental cooperation, professional training was the main focus. This research was followed by *Cross-Border Cooperation in Higher Education: Closing-up Strategies and Cooperation Tactics* (1995–1996) and *Regional Cooperation in Tertiary Education* (1996–1999), which examined cross-border collaboration in higher education. The latter study focused in depth on three regions: the Hungarian-Slovak, Hungarian-Romanian, and Italian-Austrian border areas, identifying similarities and differences and outlining potential avenues for cooperation.

Between 1994 and 1996, the *Euroharmonisation* project examined the conditions and anticipated effects of Hungary's integration into the European Union's educational framework. This was followed by a large-scale comparative study of higher education accreditation systems in several European countries (Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine): *Higher Education Accreditation in Central Europe* (2002–2003) (for Hungary, see Kozma, Hives, Radácsi, Rébay, 2003). Kozma concluded that Central European accreditation served as a tool for convergence and internationalization. The Bologna Process, as another major stage in European harmonization, also became the subject of large-scale research (*Bologna Process in Central Europe*, 2007–2009). Kozma observed that in the years preceding this research, Central Europe underwent two successive higher education reforms: in the 1990s, the focus was on establishing independent higher education systems, while in the 2000s, these still nascent systems had to align with the European Higher Education Area (i.e., Europe-wide standards) (Kozma & Rébay, 2008ab; Kozma, Rébay, Óhidy, & Szolár, 2013).

Tamás Kozma also conducted research specifically on minority education, initially focusing on Hungarians: *Minority Education: The Case of the Hungarian People* (1998–1999). Following post-World War I border changes, the number of Hungarians living abroad increased, and after 1989/90, their mother-tongue education was reorganized. Kozma and colleagues examined the possibilities for organizing Hungarian-language higher education, previously limited during the communist era to theological education, and the conditions for establishing new institutions (cf. Kozma et al., 2000). Later studies extended to other European regions and minority groups (*Minority Education in Central Europe*, 2000–2002). Some findings were summarized in Kozma and Polónyi (2004), which compared educational systems and policies in Western and Eastern Europe. Another comparative study, conducted with Katalin R. Forray, focused on the education of Roma communities in Southeastern Europe (Forray & Kozma, 2012).

Tamás Kozma has contributed numerous chapters on Hungary to comparative publications prepared using comparative methodologies. He participated in the large-scale comparative handbook *School Systems in Europe*, organized by Hans Döbert (DIPF, Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education) and colleagues. This volume, including the Hungarian chapter, was published in German and English in multiple editions during the 2000s and 2010s (first edition: Kozma & Rébay, 2002). While this work provided an overview of national educational systems, Kozma and colleagues also contributed to comparative handbooks and professional publications focusing specifically on higher education from various perspectives (Hives, Kozma & Polónyi, 2019; Kozma & Polónyi, 2018; Kozma, Polónyi & Pusztai, 2020; Polónyi & Kozma, 2021; Polónyi & Kozma, 2022).

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