



Introducing ELTE TÓK's Kindergarten Education BA Programme

Internationalisation in the past, present, and future

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The Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education of ELTE has more than 150 years of experience in training early childhood educators. In its own field, it is one of the most recognised institutions in Hungary. As part of its international programmes, short mobilities (lasting for one or two semesters) have been operating successfully at the faculty for a long time and in cooperation with many foreign partner universities. As guest students, foreign students can join our faculty life through Erasmus scholarship programme. In spite of these opportunities, there was an urgent need to offer full degree-granting course to be conducted exclusively in English that would also be available to non-Hungarian citizens.

Out of the faculty's existing, basic training programs, the *Kindergarten* teacher training course was chosen. Because *Pre-School Education*, the original name of the programme, was officially not allowed, our first international programme was named the *Kindergarten Education BA Program in English*, or KIDE, its abbreviation. Once this step had been completed, TÓK started its internationalisation journey by transferring the accreditation material for the Hungarian-language training into English. We could now start to prepare for when, in just a year's time, we would be welcoming new students from both Hungary as well from anywhere in the world.

I began working at Eötvös Loránd University's Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (ELTE TÓK) in 2018 and not only was I there at the birth of the Kindergarten Education BA Programme, but I have also been paving its way ever since. Let's see where we started and how far we have come since those early days!

Beginnings

Despite our many years of experience training kindergarten teachers in Hungarian, when launching our first English-language programme we practically had to rethink and plan all parts of the admission system, from the input requirements, through the procedural orders, all the way to the deadlines, etc. Whereas in the case of the Hungarian procedure, the regulations issued by the Office of Education (Oktatási Hivatal) must be followed, when recruiting foreign students, the decision of how to admit non-Hungarian citizens was actually in our hands in most cases -- together with the many pros and cons that accompanied this "freedom". Due to this circumstance, several extra tasks have been assigned to us, such as checking foreign secondary school certificates, administration fees, tuition payments (it is often not easy to start transfers from certain countries to a Hungarian bank account, e.g., Japan, Iran), dealing with visa issues, and accommodation arrangements.

Admission procedure

The first big challenge was how to organise the aptitude test. In the case of admissions for Hungarian citizens, on-the-spot aptitude tests conducted in person are considered essential for evaluating the applicants' abilities in singing, physical fitness, and speech abilities, as well as for assessing their genuine English-language skills. Hungary's pre-school system has been designed to reflect the belief that early education is best achieved by supporting knowledge *acquisition* rather than instruction. As a result of this approach, kindergarten teachers receive a strong foundation in how to use songs, art, stories, hands-on learning, and physical activities to develop language fluency while preparing children for primary school. It is therefore extremely important for all applicants to demonstrate their aptitude in singing, physical fitness, and language/enunciation before beginning any of our education programmes.

Particularly in light of the current situation in the world, it would not have been practical to expect applicants to travel around the world for the sake of taking an entrance exam in Budapest, at the university. Given that no other option was available, we transferred the recruitment process to the online space, using Skype at first. While this procedure would be quite normal now, after two years of online teaching, at the time it was quite a new experience for everyone. Despite the technical problems (such as intermittent internet connections, etc.) the appointments went smoothly. After many technical difficulties, we experienced exciting and uplifting moments when applicants from Egypt, Pakistan, or even China, whom we had previously only known based on written documentation, finally appeared on screen. Following these experiences, we had to rethink many small details in progress. In the end, we

voted for [Zoom](#), which may have received much criticism at the time, but served as an excellent solution for us.

Later on, the application committee decided to change the requirements, especially in the area of evaluating singing abilities. Due to the intermittent nature of the internet, tasks such as e.g., rhythm clapping were completely impossible. It soon became apparent that it was not possible to expect all foreign students to be able to read sheet music, as this skill is not taught in many education systems. Even though the Kodály method is known worldwide, this does not mean that music education is found in basic education everywhere.

Holding the physical fitness aptitude test online would have been even more unrealistic. In response to this realisation, the colleagues at the Department of Physical Education put together a series of tasks that enabled them to assess the applicant's movements, coordination, and level of physical fitness. From year to year, it has been necessary to refine the list of tasks required for successful completion of the various aptitude tests: it is not much of an exaggeration to state that almost every culture interpreted the instructions differently. Finally, we made a sample video because traditional descriptions could not be clearly interpreted by all applicants in a way that would ensure equal opportunities for all. Although completing this exam is of great importance, due to cultural differences, we had to factor in a few basic differences compared to what we were used to seeing from students who had completed the Hungarian education system. To name one example, in Arab cultures, sports for women are prohibited, especially in public places, so it was not easy for applicants from these countries to submit a proper recording. Differences in access to equipment or IT skills also meant that the technical preparation of the recording itself often proved a challenge, just like uploading these materials to the system. What remains a constant challenge for all of us is the time difference caused by geographical distances. Thanks to the entrance committee's flexibility, these problems could be also bridged most easily.

Recruitment

After three years of experience, it can be established that –especially for those who have graduated from bilingual high schools in Hungary– students with strong English knowledge are happy to choose our English Language Kindergarten Teacher Training. In addition to the professional confirmation of their English knowledge, the qualification obtained here promises them secure jobs in bilingual kindergartens.

However, it always remains a large challenge for us to reach people living outside the country, especially overseas. We must constantly consider the question of what would make our programme attractive enough for a foreign student to leave home and come to Budapest. How can we ensure that the university degree obtained in Hungary is viewed as being valuable? How

can we convince our potential applicants that the qualification they have obtained with us is accepted abroad and can be naturalised in their own country? Is our 150-year past enough to convince them?! Most importantly, how do we get that information to them? How can we dispel their doubts or concerns?

Recruitment takes place through ELTE's International Office on the one hand, and at the faculty level on the other. ELTE's International Office additionally makes it possible for us to be present on numerous platforms promoting international training. Contracts with various educational agencies are also made at the Head Office of ELTE, with whom they organise regular, personal meetings, so we have the opportunity to present our degree programme. With their help, we appear at numerous domestic and international fairs by means of publications, where, of course, ELTE presents itself and its entire international training portfolio.

Of course, the ELTE "brand name" represents a serious authority and advantage for us, but this alone would not be sufficient for complete success. A lot is also needed at the basic working level of the faculty in order to gain future students' trust. We can communicate primarily through the [website](#) and the [social media](#) platforms.

Before any of this is possible, an entire, English-language website first had to be built in order to showcase the faculty and the programme itself. An important aspect for us is that this website could not just be a source of dry information: it is our goal to allow applicants to gain as much insight as possible into the faculty's world and everyday life. Beyond refreshing our website regularly, we also post vibrant bits of news, quick shots of programmes, and brief videos that allow us to introduce ourselves. Another important factor is for our training courses to be described by authentic students who have experienced our education firsthand and can recommend it so that others will choose us as well. A great opportunity for accomplishing this came when a KIDE instructor and students from various nationalities could discuss our programme through an online webinar, in the form of an extremely friendly and pleasant conversation, that you can see [here](#). We also try to reach interested parties by sharing the personal thoughts of [KIDE students](#).

However, implementing these principles is not always so easy. Although many programmes failed or faltered during the pandemic, it is also clear that in the case of specific programmes, it is difficult to "deliver" the information about them to the public, since there is often not enough capacity for a wide-ranging communication task (photographing, article writing, editing, distribution, etc.). Unfortunately, there is the chance that even great programmes that have been implemented successfully are not always communicated effectively.

Having the help of a marketing specialist this year has been a great advantage for us. A lot of advertising materials have been made recently. To mention a

small, yet important aspect related to creating authentic materials: when designing programme announcements, we are finally able to choose from a range of photos taken exclusively for us, rather than a set of generic stock photos that provide applicants with no genuine image of our work or faculty.

Admission options

The platforms used in the course of the admission procedure are managed by different departments, meaning that we can only determine the content. Those wishing to study with us can apply for the Kindergarten Education BA program on the following interfaces:

- felvi.hu – exclusively for those with a Hungarian high school diploma
- elte.hu – for non-Hungarian citizens or Hungarians who have graduated abroad

It is also important to mention that – through the scholarship program financed by the TEMPUS public foundation and by the Hungary Helps foundation – non-Hungarian citizens can also apply via the following scholarship opportunities:

- [Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme](#)
- [Scholarship for Hungarian Diaspora](#)
- [Scholarship Programme for Christian Young People](#)

These previous options are extremely important to us, as we have been earmarked for a large proportion of scholarship students. Unfortunately, very few scholarships have been awarded to our applicants (to date, typically only one applicant per semester receives one of these grants). Sadly, in light of these results, it must be concluded that the amount of work invested into the admission process and other bureaucratic procedures is nowhere close to the rate of success.

After the great amount of effort, preparation, and excitement that went into launching ELTE TÓK's first international degree programme, it was an [uplifting moment](#) when the first Kindergarten Education BA Class of 2019/20 finally started. Following this strong start, the world-wide alarm caused by Covid-19 significantly reduced the number of applicants from abroad. Some applicants were admitted yet did not dare to leave home due to the epidemic situation. A few students initially followed the classes online, from afar, but were not able to keep up with the courses due to the time difference.

At the same time, it was a huge administrative burden for all admitted, non-Hungarian citizens to comply with current Covid regulations or limitations, factors that can change almost daily. For the 2022/2023 academic year, the war in Ukraine has certainly hampered and is still hampering the recruitment process.

Since the training was announced, students from China, South Korea, Iran, Mexico, Italy, Ukraine, Bangladesh, and the US have greatly added to

the diversity of our faculty life. With the addition of each student coming from a new country, we become more and more experienced in relation to the education system as well as gaining new perspectives in cultural background.

Based on the experience so far, the idea of starting a “Preparatory class” has arisen. By offering an extra year for preparation, those who do not possess sufficient background for passing the aptitude test yet are dedicated to pursuing a career as a kindergarten teacher can access the knowledge that they need to experience greater success in studying at our international BA programme. As was previously mentioned, differences in culture or educational systems mean that large gaps in knowledge can exist, mainly in the fields of singing and music and English-language skills.

To mention some further areas for improvement, we still have serious shortcomings in the international (English) displays and signs containing important messages for students around and inside our buildings. Furthermore, our other task to solve is to implement in English and promote the many rich events and opportunities that we offer yearly as part of our faculty traditions, such as the TDK, or the Scientific Students' Associations Conference, an academic competition that allows students to present important research findings in the field of early childhood education. The development of the website is constantly on the agenda, as there are still many areas which we must also make available in English to foreign students studying at the faculty, such as the information necessary for practical training courses.

Yet these many challenges fade away in light of the fact that the first Kindergarten Education class graduated this year! After many years of work, this was just one of the uplifting [moments](#) that we have had the joy to experience. It was a good feeling to see that this frequently difficult work has paid off. Not only does the happiness of carefully prepared, successful, graduated students give us faith in the future, it also inspires us to know that the special methods and approaches that ELTE TÓK has been developing for the past 150 years will find their way to kindergartens throughout the world. We believe and trust that their success will inspire many more to follow a similar path and experience the same joy at our university as their predecessors.

