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HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT IN THE CENTRAL DANUBE PRIORITY AREA

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ABSTRACT

The Central Danube Priority Area (CDPA), comprising 99 municipalities, was established in 2020 with the aim of providing an organized framework for the opportunities and challenges arising from the expansion of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant. A regional development concept and strategic program was created for the Priority Area, which includes human development priority and measures. As the only higher education institution in the area, the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Education and Regional Development of the University of Pécs (PTE KPVK) is involved in several ongoing programs related to human resource development concepts. The study presents the vision of the Central Danube Priority Area, the region's human resource potential, and the role of the Faculty in successful human resource development measures.

Keywords: Central Danube Priority Area, human development, University of Pécs

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HUMÁNERŐFORRÁS-FEJLESZTÉS A KÖZÉP-DUNA MENTI KIEMELT TÉRSÉGBEN

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ABSZTRAKT

A 99 települést magába foglaló Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség (KDMKT) 2020-ban azzal a céllal került megalapításra, hogy a Paksi Atomerőmű bővítéséből adódó lehetőségeknek és kihívásoknak szervezett kereteket biztosítson. A Kiemelt Térségre területfejlesztési koncepció és stratégiai program született, melyben mások mellett humánfejlesztési prioritás és intézkedések is szerepelnek. A térség egyetlen felsőoktatási intézményeként a Pécsi Tudományegyetem Kultúratudományi, Pedagógusképző és Vidékfejlesztési Kara (PTE KPVK) több, jelenleg is folyamatban lévő programmal kapcsolódik a humánerőforrás-fejlesztési elképzelésekhez. A tanulmány keretében bemutatásra kerül a Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség jövőképe, a térség humánerőforrás adottságai, valamint a PTE KPVK sikeres humánfejlesztési intézkedésekben történt szerepvállalása.

Kulcsszavak: Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség, humánfejlesztés, Pécsi Tudományegyetem

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1. Introduction: The establishment and vision of the Central Danube Priority Area

The establishment of the Central Danube Priority Area (CDPA) is regulated by Resolution 12/2020. OGY (Az Országgyűlés 12/2020. (V. 5.) OGY határozata a Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt térség területi lehatárolásáról; Parliamentary decision on the territory of the CDPA). The region comprises a total of 99 settlements in three counties (Bács-Kiskun, Fejér, Tolna), with the largest proportion in Tolna (62), followed by Bács-Kiskun (29) and Fejér (8). In terms of spatial structure, the area consists of three distinct parts:

- small village hill country (rural western zone: Tamási, Bonyhád, Szekszárd, and Sárbogárd districts);
- developed urban axis (economic-technological core area, Danube corridor: Dunaföldvár, Solt, Paks, Kalocsa, Tolna, Szekszárd);
- transitional development region (eastern, Bácska area).

The heterogeneous spatial structure is also clearly distinguishable in the development priorities. While in the small villages in the western part, the development of the transport network, the development of inadequate public utilities (sewage network), and improving the ability of businesses to cooperate and attract resources can lead to greater success, in the case of the urban axis, it is much more likely that the technological and human resource development of businesses can increase innovation potential and further strengthen the central role of settlements. The area east of the Danube can primarily expect to increase its competitiveness through the development of transport infrastructure. The vision of the CDPA is to create a "green zone" based on a stable and dynamic economy supported by strong local businesses, high-quality infrastructure and public services, and a well-functioning community life, resulting in a continuously improving quality of life for the region's inhabitants.

It is important to note that although the Paks Nuclear Power Plant is located within the CDPA in geographical terms, the power plant remains under national jurisdiction and, as an external factor, cannot be a central element of the development of the Priority Area. Nevertheless, it is inseparable from the labor market and business development processes in the region, and has been identified in the following way in its overall development objectives: "Exploiting the opportunities and addressing the challenges generated by the expansion of the Paks power plant, which will define the coming decades of the CDPA, in a way that ensures the harmonious, balanced, and sustainable development of the CDPA on the one hand, and, on the other hand, contributes to the CDPA's ability to improve its attractiveness and value creation capacity by building on local ambitions, values, and cooperation" (A Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség Területfejlesztési Koncepciója 2021-2035, 2021: 14; The development concept of the CDPA).

The six pillars of economic development in the narrow sense can be summarized as follows (A Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség Fejlesztési Koncepciójához kapcsolódó Stratégiai Program 2021-2027, 2021; Strategic program of the development concept of the CDPA):

- industry and agriculture providing significant employment;
- high-quality, easily accessible, wide-ranging services;
- a unique, innovative product range in the agricultural and food sector based on local characteristics and cooperation;
- a knowledge- and technology-intensive innovation cluster based on nuclear power plant development and operation;
- sustainable environmental management based on clean energy and advanced technology;
- tourism that creates jobs.

Ideally, the services provided by nearby medium-sized and large cities (Budapest, Dunaújváros, Kaposvár, Kecskemét, Pécs, Székesfehérvár, and Veszprém) should complement rather than replace those offered by businesses operating in the region.

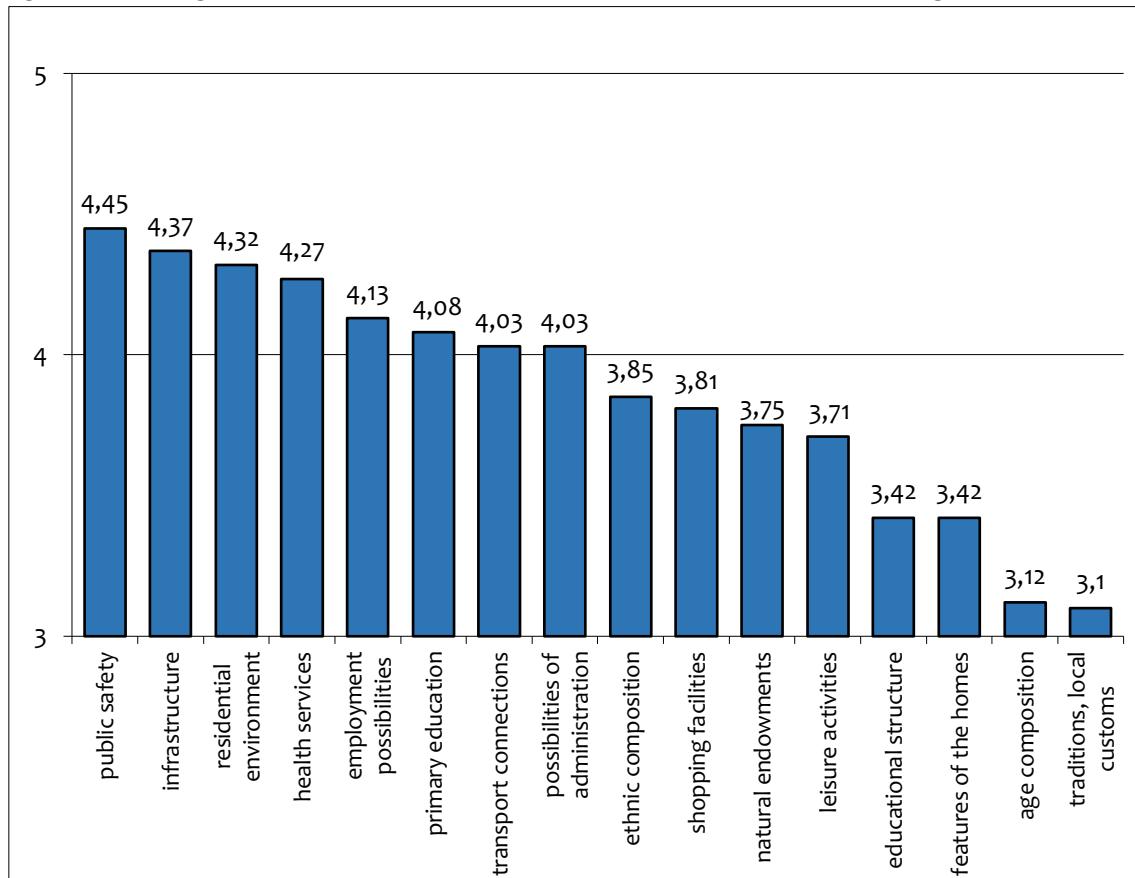
The broader development principles include the following:

- improvement of quality of life: growing material wealth, adequate public safety, an inspiring community that increases the population retention capacity of settlements, a clean and natural environment, high-quality health services, a promising future, and the mitigation of conflicts;
- ensuring environmental and social sustainability: abundance of natural resources, a livable environment, vitality of local identities and cultures, social harmony;
- use and exploitation of local values: interventions rely on the support and efforts of local actors, and the objectives of the interventions are in line with the opportunities and capabilities of local economic actors and communities;
- inspiring uniqueness and excellence: economic development serves the uniqueness and quality-oriented nature of businesses' products, technologies, and business processes;
- providing an appropriate background and opportunities for all individuals and organizations concerned: stable, secure, and predictable living conditions, accessible public services, and prospects for individual development regardless of social or geographical position;
- ensuring networked, cluster-based operation: development- and innovation-oriented cooperation and partnerships based on networks of key regional players, municipalities, businesses, and organizations.

Our preliminary research clearly supports the necessary diversity of the listed development aspects (Koltai, 2014). Data collection was completed with a layered questionnaire survey on the attractiveness of settlements (the four aspects being the distribution of the Hungarian population by region, the breakdown of the population by gender, age group, and educational attainment; a thousand randomly selected individuals responded to our questions). We were interested in, among other things, what aspects the Hungarian population prioritizes when choosing their place of residence. Public safety received the highest rating, followed by infrastructure, the condition of the residential environment, and healthcare services (Figure 1). On a five-point scale, four other factors scored above 4.0 (employment opportunities and conditions, preschool and primary

education, transport connections, and administrative services). The second group of lower-rated residential attractions was led by the ethnic composition of the population (3.85), with the age composition of the population and the history and traditions of the settlement bringing up the rear. As part of a related study, 19 factors were evaluated by residents of nine urban areas (Szirmai & Váradi, 2009). The most important consideration was that “people enjoy living here,” and respondents considered social rather than economic factors to be more important in achieving this (public safety, improvement of living conditions, quality of healthcare, environmental and nature protection, waste management).

Figure 1. Ranking of settlement attractiveness based on a survey of the Hungarian population



Source: Koltai (2014).

The Danube is the CDPA's most important natural resource, with inestimable ecological, cultural, tourist, and transport value. Local culture, the ethnic groups living here, traditions, works of art, and events that also function as tourist attractions all strengthen the shared identity. The green zone is built on advanced technology, a sustainable environment, local identity, and cooperation.

The Central Danube Development Council is responsible for implementing the regional development concept and strategic program, striving for effective partnerships with key social, economic, political, and scientific actors of the CDPA, including the most involved

higher education institution, the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Education and Regional Development of the University of Pécs.

The main activities of the operational working organization, the Central Danube Development Agency Nonprofit Ltd. (CDDA Nonprofit Ltd.), include service provision, advocacy, and community building. Within this framework, the Training and Employment Development Forum working group was established in 2022, whose members include the University of Pécs, the University of Dunaújváros, vocational training centers (Tolna County VTC, Kecskemét VTC, Baja VTC, Kiskunhalas VTC, Dunaújváros VTC, Székesfehérvár VTC, Southern Agricultural VTC), as well as the Klebelsberg Center's District Centers (Baja DC, Kiskörös DC, Dunaújváros DC, Szekszárd DC, Tamási DC). In addition to performing its organizational tasks, CDDA assists stakeholders in the region by providing information, building relationships, and engaging in project development and project management activities.

2. Literature review

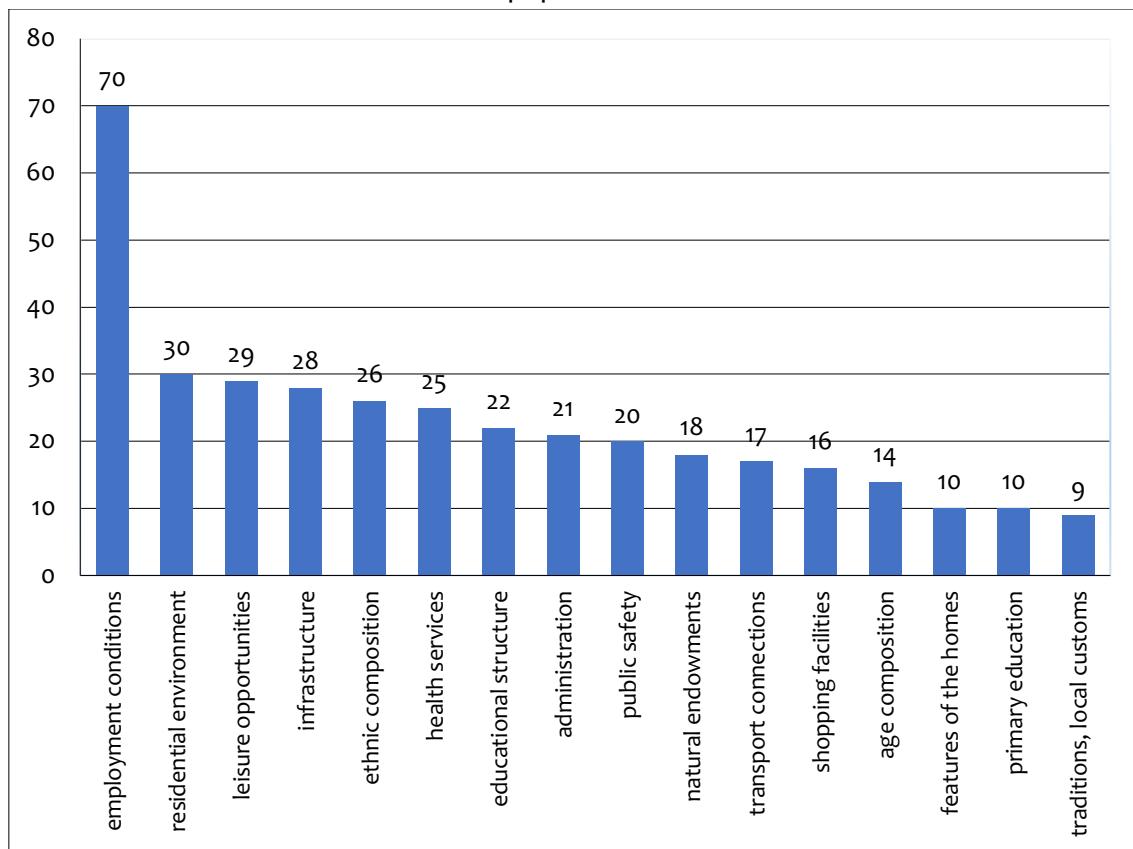
2.1. The role of human resources in regional development

The link between the quality and innovativeness of human capital and economic development is undeniable. The relationship between regional competitiveness and innovation is two-way, as not only do innovation results increase the competitiveness of a region, but more developed areas also provide more favorable conditions for the creation of innovative solutions (Rittgasszer & Lukovics, 2012). Beluszky's (2000) related studies clearly support the correlation between the volume of intellectual capital in a settlement and its position in the urban hierarchy. According to his research findings, intellectual capital plays a real role in about 50 Hungarian cities, while in the rest, it is rather its absence that causes a disadvantage. In his study of the acceptance of innovation in rural areas, Rechnitzer concluded that intellectual resources and the proportion of people with secondary and higher education can be highlighted as fundamental background conditions for innovation (Rechnitzer et al., 2003, Rechnitzer et al., 2004, Grosz & Rechnitzer, 2005).

The increase in geographical distance from Budapest has a negative impact on cities' receptiveness to innovation: the further a settlement is from the capital, the less innovative its environment tends to be. A study extended to suburban areas found that the state of a city's immediate environment can generate significant differences in its competitiveness, as the settlements in its catchment area may only be users of the center's innovation capacities, but through the cooperation that develops between them, they can also contribute significantly to strengthening the role of the center. Based on human resources and innovation indicators, more than three-quarters of cities scored below average (Nárai, 2005). Our previously cited research (Koltai, 2014) also supports the importance of human development and employment in regional development. The younger age group (20-39 years old) and the middle age group (40-59 years old) rated the importance of employment opportunities for regional development as particularly high, just as employment conditions

are much more important for those with secondary education than for those with only primary education. Among the underlying reasons for the intention to move (Figure 2), employment conditions also clearly stood out, followed by four or five similarly rated factors (condition of the residential environment, leisure opportunities, infrastructure provision, ethnic composition of the population, and health services).

Figure 2. Reasons behind potential changes of residence based on a survey of the Hungarian population



Source: Koltai (2014).

Tésits and Rongics (2024) examined the spatial structure of part of the Győr agglomeration based on human and physical infrastructure, paying particular attention to unemployment, highest level of education, and personal income tax rates, among other factors. They concluded that settlements with lower population density and income levels, as well as those located further away from the county seat, can be considered resource-poor areas from both an economic and human perspective. Numerous comparative analyses have been conducted based on demographic functional trends in cities, the proportion of the working-age population, the educational attainment and ethnic composition of the population (Ehrlich, 2006; Baráth & Váradi, 2009; Tóth & Virág, 2010; Gyurkó & Bujdosó, 2019; Juha, 2023).

2.2. Human resources and their development in the Central Danube Priority Area

The working-age population (15-64 years) of the Priority Area is approximately 150,000 (Népszámlálás [Census] 2022; Grónay & Majoros, 2024). The distribution of the population by highest level of education completed clearly shows that the proportion of people with higher education and secondary school qualifications in the CDPA area is significantly lower than the national average. Accordingly, those with primary education and secondary vocational qualifications are overrepresented:

- primary school 22.4% (national average: 18.6%),
- secondary school with vocational qualification 23.5% (18%),
- high school diploma 24.7% (28.3%),
- university, college 13% (19.1%).

In 2022, the number of employed persons in the Priority Area was 110,053, or 46.3% of the population (below the national average of 49.1%), while inactive persons receiving benefits accounted for 27.1% of the population, compared to the national average of 23.6%. The distribution of employees by highest level of education attained, corresponding to the highest level of education attained by the population, was as follows:

- primary school 12.6% (national average: 10.3%),
- secondary school with vocational certificate 31.5% (23.2%),
- high school diploma 33.9% (36.2%),
- university, college 21.3% (29.7%).

The highest proportion of people with higher education qualifications is found in the Priority Area's most populous cities, Szekszárd, Paks, and Kalocsa (Figure 3).

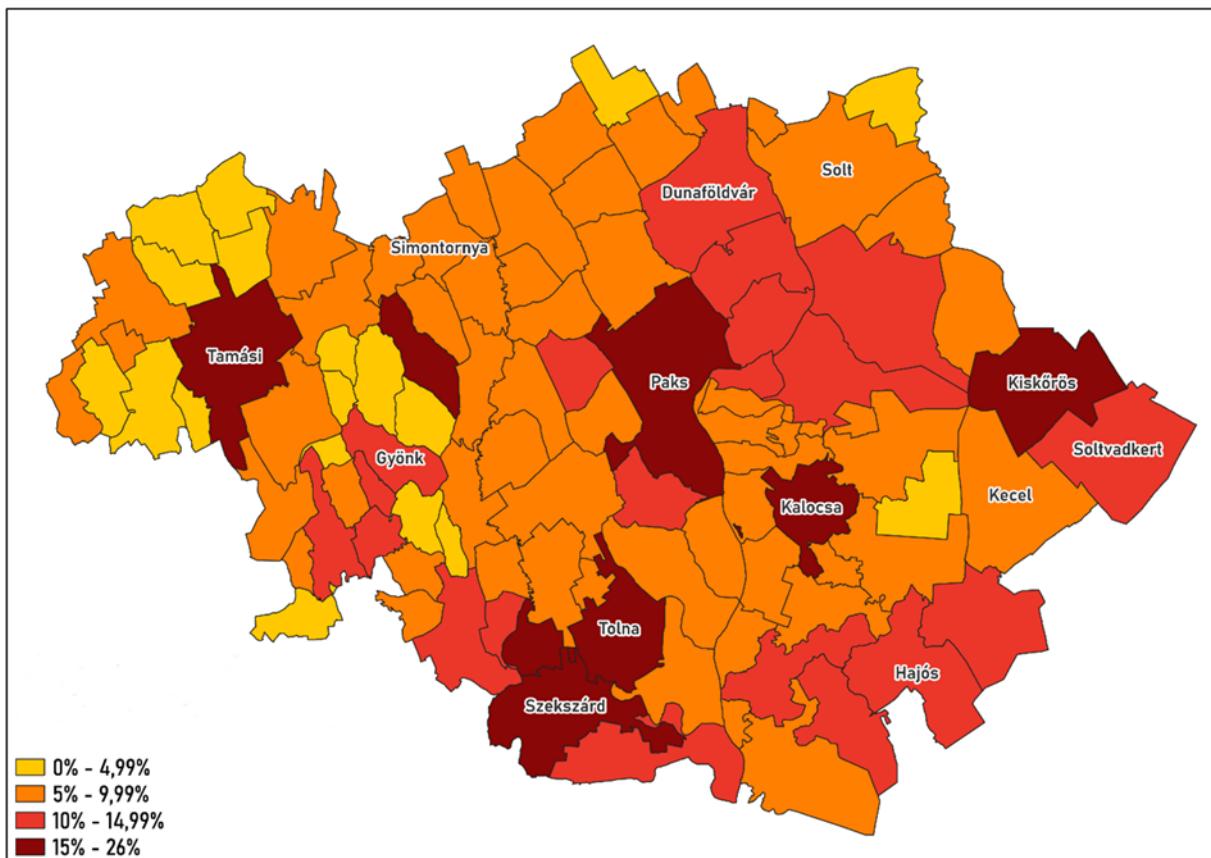
There are 46,799 businesses operating in the Priority Area, of which 22,109 (by main activity) are in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (47.2%), which is nearly twice the national average (24.4%) (Grónay, 2024, A regisztrált vállalkozások száma nemzetgazdasági ág szerint; Registered enterprises by economic sector).

The number of new jobs reported also confirms the heterogeneous nature of the Priority Area (Grónay & Majoros, 2024). In addition to public administration, which offers job opportunities in all three counties, Bács-Kiskun offers jobs in trade, vehicle repair, agriculture, forestry, and fishing, In the settlements of Fejér county, human health, social care, accommodation services, and hospitality, while in Tolna county, water supply, sewage collection and treatment, trade, and vehicle repair are the most affected.

In December 2024, there were 5,882 registered job seekers in the region, representing 3.8% of the working-age population (national figure: 3.5%, A munkaerőpiaci helyzet alakulása a nemzeti foglalkoztatási szolgálat legfrissebb adatai alapján; Changes in labor market composition according to the latest official figures). The most favorable data can be found in the eastern, Bácska area (Figure 4). Similarly to the national data, 5% of job seekers in the region were considered career starters, 42% had at most a primary school

education (national data: 40%), while 38% were considered long-term job seekers, having been unemployed for more than a year (national: 35%).

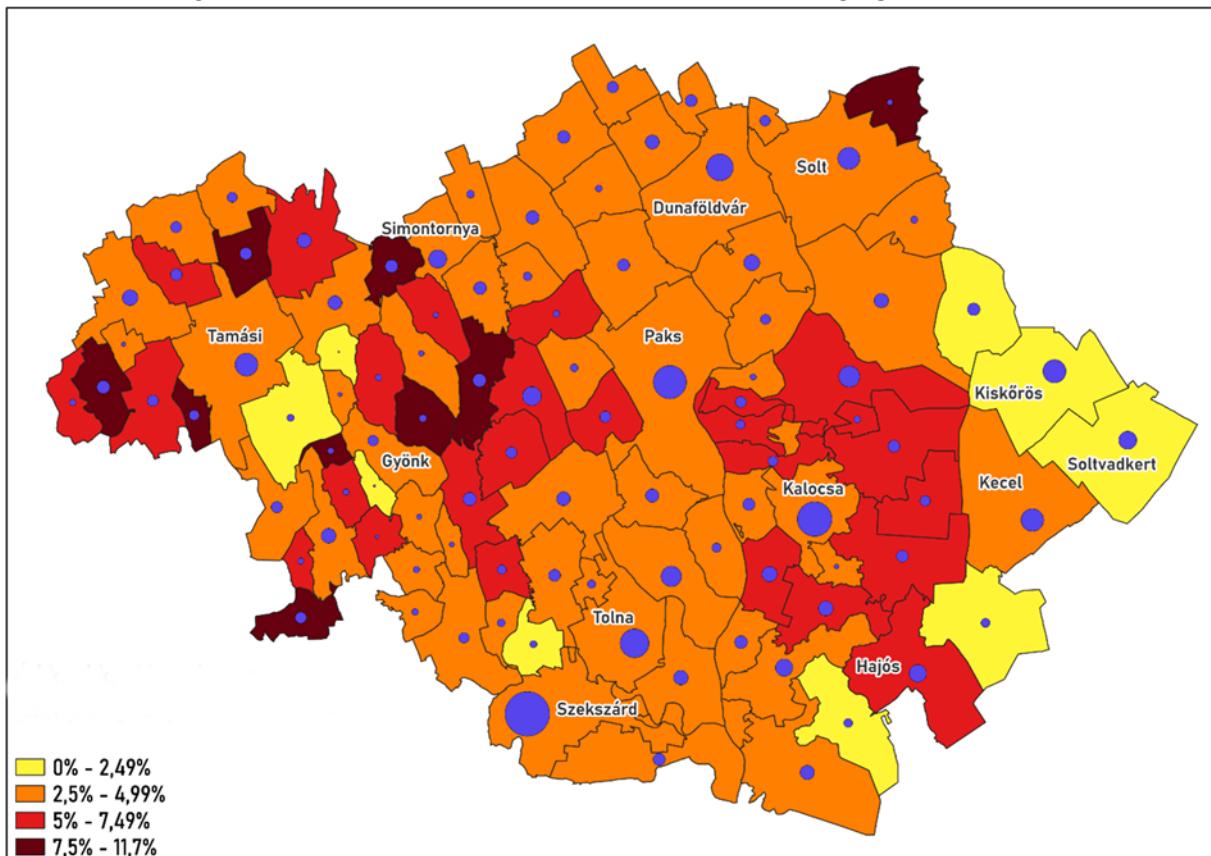
Figure 3. Proportion of people with higher education qualifications among the population aged 7 and over



Source: Új Gazdaságpolitikai Akcióterv II. és III. pilléreinek támogatása a kiemelt térségi fejlesztési tanácsok bevonásával projekt; Supporting pillars 2 and 3 of the New economic policy action plan with the involvement of the priority regional development councils.

There are no significant differences in the gender distribution of registered job seekers in the three counties concerned (Bács-Kiskun: 55.4% women, 44.6% men; Fejér: 57.4% women, 42.9% men; Tolna: 53.2% women, 46.8% men), but when comparing the ratio of registered new jobs to registered job seekers, we found much more significant differences (Bács-Kiskun: 159.8%, Fejér: 112.5%, Tolna: 120.2%).

Figure 4: Number of job seekers relative to the working-age population



Source: Új Gazdaságpolitikai Akcióterv II. és III. pilléreinek támogatása a kiemelt térségi fejlesztési tanácsok bevonásával projekt; Supporting pillars 2 and 3 of the New economic policy action plan with the involvement of the priority regional development councils.

Human development is also included among the medium-term sectoral priorities, with the strengthening of the skills of people living in the CDPA being treated as a priority objective. Within the human development priority, four areas of action and ten specific measures have been identified (A Közép-Duna Menti Kiemelt Térség Fejlesztési Koncepciójához kapcsolódó Stratégiai Program 2021-2027, 2021; Strategic program of the development concept of the CDPA):

Action Area I: Capacity expansion and infrastructure development in public education

- Expanding the range of accessible public and private nursery and kindergarten services;
- Expanding primary and secondary education capacities by supporting the development of existing infrastructure;
- Teacher and andragogist development, with a view to expanding the range of tools used.

The focus of human development ideas is on getting as many adults in the Priority Area as possible to become active participants in the labor market. This includes halting the

current unfavorable demographic trends by keeping young adults in the area, supporting their efforts to start families and have children, and making the CDPA attractive to new residents. Of course, it cannot be ignored that the Paks II investment will result in domestic and foreign workers and their families staying here, which in itself justifies the expansion of the capacity and infrastructure development of the educational institution network. This is further reinforced by the intention that people who currently only have basic qualifications should be able to obtain secondary-level, specialized qualifications through school-based adult education, thereby improving their position in the labor market. Although the title of Action Area I suggests a narrower scope, it also includes measures to shape public attitudes from childhood to adulthood (see Action Area IV), which serve to realize the CDPA's vision of an innovation-friendly green zone through the multi-faceted development of the competencies of teachers and adult education professionals.

Action Area II: Development of the education, vocational training, and employment system, preparation for adaptation to foreseeable changes

- Preparation and implementation of a demand- and supply-driven, continuously reviewed education and vocational training development strategy;
- Development of a scholarship program related to the training system operating in the CDPA;
- Increasing the importance of R & D & I in the CDPA by strengthening the presence of higher education institutions.

The strategy coordinated by the Central Danube Development Agency, which focuses on taking into account the needs of both employers and employees, would enable effective and adaptive, multi-sectoral training programs, thereby supporting the spread of flexible forms of work and improving employment conditions. The planned higher education scholarship would provide young adults with predictability for the duration of their higher education studies through financial and employment support from future local employers, thereby strengthening their identity with the CDPA and promoting favorable demographic trends. The Strategic Program's intention to change the underrepresentation of higher education institutions requires, in my opinion, a more nuanced approach.

In addition to the fact that the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Education and Regional Development of the University of Pécs is based in Szekszárd and its predecessor college has been providing higher education locally since 1977, the Faculty's teacher training profile has expanded significantly. It now welcomes applicants to higher education with programs in agricultural sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences, which, if there are enough applicants, can be further expanded by the wide-ranging training portfolio of the University of Pécs. All this naturally results in the increased importance of R&D&I in the Priority Area, as described in specific measure II.3.

Action Area III: Supporting social inclusion

- Promoting the involvement of Roma communities (primarily in the implementation of agricultural and rural development projects);

- Strengthening the labor market integration of disadvantaged groups and increasing their level of education and employment.

The area of action aimed at social inclusion is based on the favorable agricultural conditions of the Priority Area. It recognizes the possibility that members of the local Roma community, after acquiring the necessary professional and personal skills, can simultaneously increase their chances of reintegration into the labor market, become self-sustaining small farmers, and provide the additional labor supply needed in the agricultural sector. Other priority target groups include people under the age of 25, people over 50, people with disabilities, people with changed working abilities, parents with young children, long-term job seekers, people with low levels of education, and students with special educational needs, for whom effective labor market integration can be ensured through retraining and skills development. All this can serve as an effective tool for increasing the educational attainment of people living in the CDPA, as well as for community development and strengthening local identity.

Action Area IV: Attitude shaping

- Implementation of intercultural sensitivity programs to support the expected demographic changes in the Priority Area;
- Developing and implementing a series of awareness-raising events related to environmental and social sustainability through cross-sectoral cooperation.

As previously indicated, the Paks II investment will result in a significant number of foreign workers and their family members arriving in the Priority Area. It is essential to implement intercultural awareness programs for local residents, which can help with effective conflict management and greatly support the successful integration of those arriving in the CDPA, even by simultaneously strengthening local identity. The clear goal is to eliminate prejudices, identify sources of discrimination, and raise awareness among all stakeholders of the potential benefits of cultural diversity. Understanding different cultural characteristics can benefit all local residents and newcomers, regardless of age, with employees of educational, health, and cultural institutions identified as a priority target group. Finally, the vision of the CDPA as a sustainable, green zone based on cooperation and innovation is inconceivable without the active participation of the area's residents, which can be supported by a wide range of awareness-raising programs.

3. Our university programs for human resource development in the CDPA

The following components all serve as points of connection for our previous and current university programs: program point 3 of action area I presented earlier (Teacher and andragogist development, with a view to expanding the range of tools used), program point 1 of action area II (Preparation and implementation of a demand- and supply-driven, continuously reviewed education and vocational training development strategy), program points 1 and 2 of action area III (Promoting the involvement of Roma communities and strengthening the labor market integration of disadvantaged groups, increasing their level

of education and employment), and program point 1 of action area IV (Implementation of intercultural sensitivity programs to support the expected demographic changes in the Priority Area).

In 2021, the University of Pécs provided free online English and Russian language learning opportunities for adults living in the CDP, as well as in Bonyhád and Dombóvár (Koltai, 2022). The aim of the program was to prepare residents and workers in the region to communicate effectively with foreign workers and their families arriving for the Paks II investment project, thereby supporting their willingness to cooperate. The primary target groups were the service and hospitality industries, public institutions (police, disaster management, government offices, local governments, health and educational institutions), as well as Paks power plant workers and their family members. Only people over the age of 18 could participate in the language program. Thanks to an effective recruitment process, during which 100 local regional governments, the chambers of commerce of the counties concerned, various media outlets, as well as our key corporate and other university partners were informed about the opportunity, a total of 1,164 people expressed their intention to learn the language. Registrations for the training came from 82 municipalities. Of those interested, 881 people, nearly 76% of the original number, actually joined the program. During the spring, summer, and fall enrollment periods, our courses were held in a total of 82 groups at five language levels (from beginner to advanced). The teaching was practice-oriented, with the primary goal of preparing students for real-life communication. It is worth noting that we were able to successfully complete all of the groups we started, which was clearly facilitated by the small group size (6–14 people). At the end of each module, we issued university certificates to group members, confirming their successful participation.

Our new university program was based on a 2023 regional attitude survey (research to establish and launch an innovative career orientation program). As part of the research, Medeia Ltd. staff interviewed the main stakeholders in the municipalities, mayors, members of the previously involved Training and Employment Development Forum working group, teachers (341 people), parents (239 people), and students (1,197 people) about their career orientation experiences and future plans through focus group interviews and questionnaire-based data collection. In fact, the results of the research show that the career readiness and self-awareness of students in the region is moderate or low, relying primarily on information from parents, with professional support being very rare. According to parents, appropriate career guidance is the joint responsibility of parents and class teachers, and finally, class teachers have greater knowledge about the subject but, due to lack of time, are unable to pass on their knowledge to everyone, which is often incomplete and out of date, confirmed our decision to launch the “Personalized Approach to Territorial Life and Career Support” (PATHS) project (Personalized Approach to Territorial Life and Career Support, 2025). The aim of the three-year Interreg Danube Program, implemented in cooperation with 13 partners in nine countries of the region, is to develop career orientation skills based on self-awareness among young people aged 12–18,

thereby helping them to choose a successful career, reducing dropout rates, supporting local prosperity, and creating new opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Launched this year, the program will include mapping international best practices, developing plans, compiling training materials for mentor training (e-learning modules, personal training), and career orientation camps.

4. Conclusion

The long-term success of any region is the result of a complex process influenced by social and natural factors in addition to economic ones. For this reason, the development of the Central Danube Priority Area can only be ensured through the synergistic cooperation of the human development priority and other sectoral priorities included in the strategic program that are not detailed in this study (infrastructure development; economic development; innovation, environmentally friendly (green) development; settlement and institutional development). The proposed measures can be refined by the CDPA participants with further related programs, as was the case with our language training and career orientation project. We are confident that, as a leading higher education institution in the Priority Area, we will continue to actively contribute to the harmonious, balanced, and sustainable development defined as an overarching regional goal.

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