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SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY AND FAMILY-LIKE ATMOSPHERE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Research was attempted with the students in the Faculty of Pedagogy of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary to map the concepts of family-like atmosphere and supportive community in university life. Building upon the Faculty's historic tradition - where strong emphasis is put on community life, moral education, and close teacher-student relationships - the study examined how such ideas live in today's student life. While students may not always even directly seek out these values when choosing a university, they deeply appreciate their existence in their everyday academic lives. This confirms that the Faculty of Pedagogy's role as community organizer - rooted in tradition and pedagogic heritage - is more than ever highly applicable today and makes a valuable contribution to the well-being and success of a student.

KEYWORDS: *higher education, Hungary, values, family-like atmosphere, supportive community*

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Reformed Teacher Training Institute of Nagykőrös in 1839 marked the beginning of the history of the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (KRE PK). Up until 1948, when the Institute was taken over by the state, it was the site of teacher training based on Protestant theology. In 1952, the last students completed their education. When the Church regained control of the school in 1990, instruction could resume. In October 1990, the Nagykőrös Teacher Training College was reopened, embodying the principles of its predecessor. The College joined the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (KRE) as its founding faculty in 1993. The educational content of the Faculty's programmes continues to be based on Protestant theological foundations, and the spirituality of the institution, its teaching, research and third mission activities follow the traditions. (KRE PK, n.d.-a) KRE put emphasize in its Mission Statement on education in the Reformed spirit to train professionals for the Reformed institutional network. (KRE, n.d.-b)

Over the last ten years, the higher education environment has significantly changed. Market-orientation and indicator-driven state subsidy system aims to turn universities to modern, competitive, 21st century institutions. There is no university that could avoid these changes if it wants to stay on the higher education market as a successful institution. As higher education is a commodity to sell, the consumer preferences are crucial. At that point the question arises, how a university with Protestant values can stand in this environment. The slogan of the Faculty at the admission campaign is the family-like environment and supportive community.

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The current study looks at KRE PK students' value preferences from the standpoint of the campaigns' primary calls. It also looks at how current students define these terms, how they think about them, and whether their definitions align with those used by the Faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term family-like atmosphere was determined by the Faculty in her 2024 admission campaign: "Our University is characterized by family-like atmosphere, open and honest relationship between teachers and students and professional cooperation besides quality education". (KRE PK, 2024) Behind the sentence there are values represented by the Faculty's predecessor, the Reformed Teacher Training Institute of Nagykőrös. The spirit of Protestant theology shaped the structure and basic values where intellectual, moral and religious education and character formation was highly emphasized. (Pap et al., 2022)

Community life and the role of the community played a key aspect in the education of teacher candidates to be prepared for church and social role (Seri, 1982; Osváth, 2021). They had a professional relationship with their teachers who "considered teacher candidates as their colleagues" (Seri, 1982, 27. p). Their individual education required attention from the teachers (Osváth, 2021, 167. p) who also set an example (Osváth, 2021, 96. p). In this way, the personality of the teacher had a role not just in providing content to the curriculum, but also in the formation of students' personal character. However, this could only be achieved with small classes that allowed them to pay attention to each other. (Szövényi, 1991; Szenczi, 2012)

Thus, KRE PK defines supportive community as a part of family-like atmosphere. However, there are broader interpretations, as family-like atmosphere itself does not appear directly in the literature. Literature does not use family-like atmosphere as a separate concept. Family-like means rather stronger relationship between the university and the family or is defined as family support services. Widening the context, literature uses the concept in three categories. Scholars associate the term with characteristics such as a supportive environment, cultural diversity in education, and the use of inclusive pedagogies from the perspective of student engagement and well-being.

Basic concept and terms used by the three interpretations are the mix of the concept used by the Faculty to describe the family-like atmosphere. The closer are those that focus on supportive environment that contributes to students' engagement and well-being, reduces the drop-out rate, increases student loyalty. Overall, it is a key factor in students' success. Focusing on students' engagement highlights the social relations in this supportive environment, Hardy & Bryson (2016) emphasize the role of academic staff. Analysing the entire study path, they find positive link between the strength of students-teacher relations and students' engagement as this professional relation create a kind of resilience in the hardest periods of students' academic lifecycle. Snijders et al. (2020) linked students' engagement with relationship management in their study and found positive effects in faculty-student relations and dedication that gave a boost to learning. Maymon (2019) also states that the support received from academic staff is an important factor in the first year of the studies as contributes to students' psychological well-being, reduces stress and quitting intentions. From the perspective of individuals, Blašková et al. (2021) state that the feel of being valued and understood support students' ongoing personal and academic development. Cole et al. (1999) emphasize this kind of genuine care inside and outside the classroom that built on trust and mutual respect, while Felder (1993) highlights the importance of community in this matter that together with personal relationships contribute to student success and creates familial ties. These theories emphasize a conducive and inviting environment grounded in trust, openness, respect, support, and acceptance. These elements encourage risk-taking and engagement in learning activities what is in the focus of Faculty's term. Such an environment mirrors the familial qualities of safety and encouragement.

The characteristics associated with a family-like atmosphere frequently overlap with those found in multicultural or inclusive educational environments. From the view of cultural diversity, inclusion and equal access are in the focus. Multicultural educational environment fosters positive relationships and intercultural tolerance (Lesyk & Kornieiev, 2021) and highlights the importance of an inclusive academic atmosphere (Sagintayeva, 2024). Faculty who are engaged and culturally responsive contribute to an atmosphere where students feel valued. (Thomas et al., 2025) Inclusive pedagogies view the topic from the side of marginalized groups. Family-like atmosphere here focuses on the methods of teaching, teaching practices (Fornauf & Erickson, 2020), and the pedagogy itself that put these groups to the centre of education (Gale & Mills, 2013). Nieminen (2022) states that inclusion is the way can provide supportive and accessible academic environment for all the students, and marginalized groups can also benefit from that.

As Faculty's education programs focus on Hungarian language teacher training and the students of the Faculty are Hungarian natives, the cultural diversity is not a core question, however inclusive pedagogy that highlights skill development is closer to the term. From the view of the teaching practices and accessible academic environment, faculty engagement and understanding of student diversity are critical to creating supportive environments.

METHODS

Full-time and part-time students of the three Hungarian campuses of the Faculty of Pedagogy were asked about their value preferences in May 2025. 194 respondents answered the questionary on this topic. The research used quantitative and qualitative methods to study the interpretation of family-like atmosphere. The first part of the research focused on the how institutional values determines the admission choice of the students and how they feel about their presence during their studies. Multiply choice, rating (Likert-scale) and ranking questions were used to map students' preferences. In this section students could rank the traditional and modern values by their importance at the admission and their presence in everyday university life. Questions also related to test the coherence of answers. As the terms family-like atmosphere and supportive community are in the focus point of the study, open questions were applied to get detailed information on how they interpret the related terms. The questionary asked the respondents to write a definition for this term. Out of 194 respondents 180 answered the question. 14 did not or used emojis instead of words. After text analyses, categorization of the answers was determined by the content. If a definition contained more than one topic, the answer appears in more categories.

The answers were separated by program type (full-time, part-time) as the age, life experience, former higher education studies could influence the definition they write. The terms used by part-time students were more devised and concrete.

For this reason, the research had a separate part focusing only on part-time students who represents two third of the Faculty's student population. The research used qualitative interviews to link the three kinds of interpretation of family-like atmosphere. The open questions asked the respondents about how they feel about the relevance of each. After text analyses, these answers were link to the keywords of the three interpretations of international literature. Part-time students were also asked about the core factors determine their faculty engagement and well-being. These definitions provided deeper insight into the explanation of the terms and their possible link to the literature. The interview questions also reflected on the special characters of part-time studies like education on the weekends and less in-person meeting among students. As time for in-person meeting is limited and part-time students have their own family-life and job environment besides the university, part-time students are more likely to be homogenous group than full-times ones who do not have these 'common problems'

in their studies. It can be the reason why close relations between teachers and students or support from teachers and their fellow students are more important for part-time students. The target group of the interview were the second-year students of Community organization BA programme, as the education program gives theoretical and practical background to define the terms and values. 26 students answered these interview questions.

RESULTS

Answers of the Faculty scale questionary showed that the relationship between the values given for the appearance of the family-like atmosphere and the supportive community are so close. on a scale of 1-5 was investigated by the Chi-squared independence test based on the observed frequencies. χ^2=169.10, df=16, p≈0, α=0,05, which proved that the perception of the family-like atmosphere and the supportive community as values are not independent of each other, there is a significant relationship between the two variables. When a respondent gives a high score to the appearance of a family environment, (s)he also gives a higher score to the supportive community. (Table 1, 2) Respondent felt the presence of each of them, that supports the applicability of the first interpretation linking family-like atmosphere to the supportive environment.

However, only this does not mean a specific causal relationship, but it draws attention to the fact that further steps needed to determine the relationship between the two variables.

1. Table: Appearance of family-like atmosphere and supportive community on 1-5 scale (pcs)

Family-like atmosphere \ Supportive community	5	4	3	2	1
5	89	25	5	2	0
4	6	24	10	3	0
3	3	3	9	1	1
2	0	1	1	2	0
1	0	1	3	1	4

2. Table: Standardized residuals for ratings given to the appearance of a family-like atmosphere and supportive community

Family-like atmosphere \ Supportive community	5	4	3	2	1
5	3,57	-1,50	-2,98	-1,53	-1,77
4	-3,37	3,48	1,52	0,71	-1,05
3	-1,91	-0,80	4,18	0,24	0,85
2	-1,42	-0,11	0,56	4,21	-0,32
1	-2,13	-0,95	1,49	0,90	7,82

During the research, students were also asked how much they seek a family-like atmosphere (FLA) and a supportive community (SC) when they made their admission choice (PRE). As Figure 1 shows, these values got prominent rank. Another question was how much they perceive the appearance of them in everyday university life (INT). (Figure 2) Comparing pre (PRE) and interim (INT), results show that those who prioritized family-like atmosphere at PRE, do feel its appearance in the everyday more markedly (χ^2=32,88, df=24, p≈0,11, α = 0,05, p>α). However, this group did not feel the appearance of supportive community more markedly (χ^2=24.25, df=24, p=0.45, α=0.05, p>α). Visually Tabel 3 and Table 4 show links between the variables. However, results of Chi-squared independence test do not state that this link could be strong enough to provide significant relations between these variables.

3. Table: Respondents who seek family-like atmosphere PRE and as they feel the presence (INT)

	FLA-INT5	FLA-INT4	FLA-INT3	FLA-INT2	FLA-INT1
FLA-PRE1	24	10	2	2	1
FLA-PRE2	37	6	1	0	2
FLA-PRE3	25	10	6	0	3
FLA-PRE4	20	8	4	0	1
FLA-PRE5	8	3	2	2	0
FLA-PRE6	2	2	0	0	0
FLA-PRE7	5	4	2	0	2

4. Table: Respondents who seek family-like atmosphere PRE (FLA-PRE) and as they feel the presence of supportive community in university life (SC-INT)

	SC-INT5	SC-INT4	SC-INT3	SC-INT2	SC-INT1
FLA-PRE1	17	12	7	2	1
FLA-PRE2	31	9	5	0	1
FLA-PRE3	19	12	9	2	2
FLA-PRE4	18	11	2	2	0
FLA-PRE5	6	4	2	3	0
FLA-PRE6	2	1	1	0	0
FLA-PRE7	5	5	2	0	1

These who were looking for rather supportive community in the time of their admission choice, show mixed results. Respondents who seek supportive community, feel the presence of it more markedly at the university life (χ^2=39.29, df=24, p=0.03, α=0.05, p<α) compared to family-like environment (χ^2=13.28, df=24, p=0,96, α=0,05, p>α]). So, there is significant link due to Chi-squared independence test in the first option.

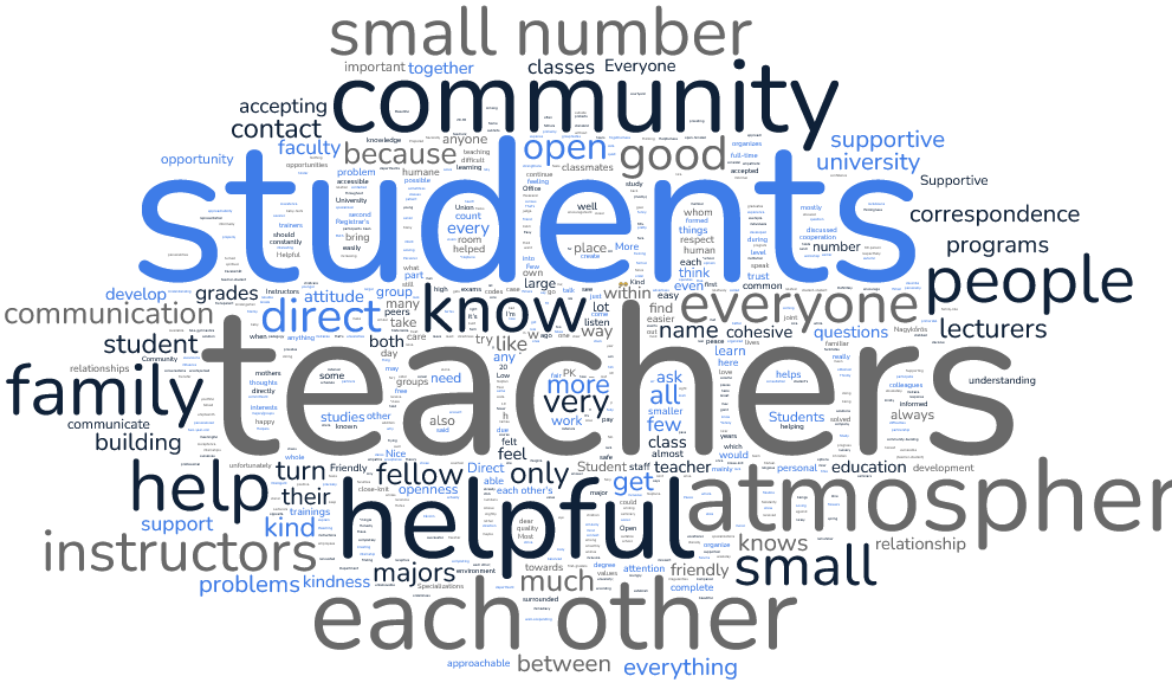
5. Table: Respondents who seek supportive community PRE and as they feel the presence (INT)

	SC-INT5	SC-INT4	SC-INT3	SC-INT2	SC-INT1
SC-PRE1	9	4	2	1	0
SC-PRE2	26	12	15	1	0
SC-PRE3	39	14	3	2	1
SC-PRE4	11	13	5	4	2
SC-PRE5	7	5	2	0	2
SC-PRE6	6	4	1	1	0
SC-PRE7	0	2	0	0	0

6. Table: Respondents who seek supportive community PRE (SC-PRE) and as they feel the presence of family-like atmosphere in university life (FLA-INT)

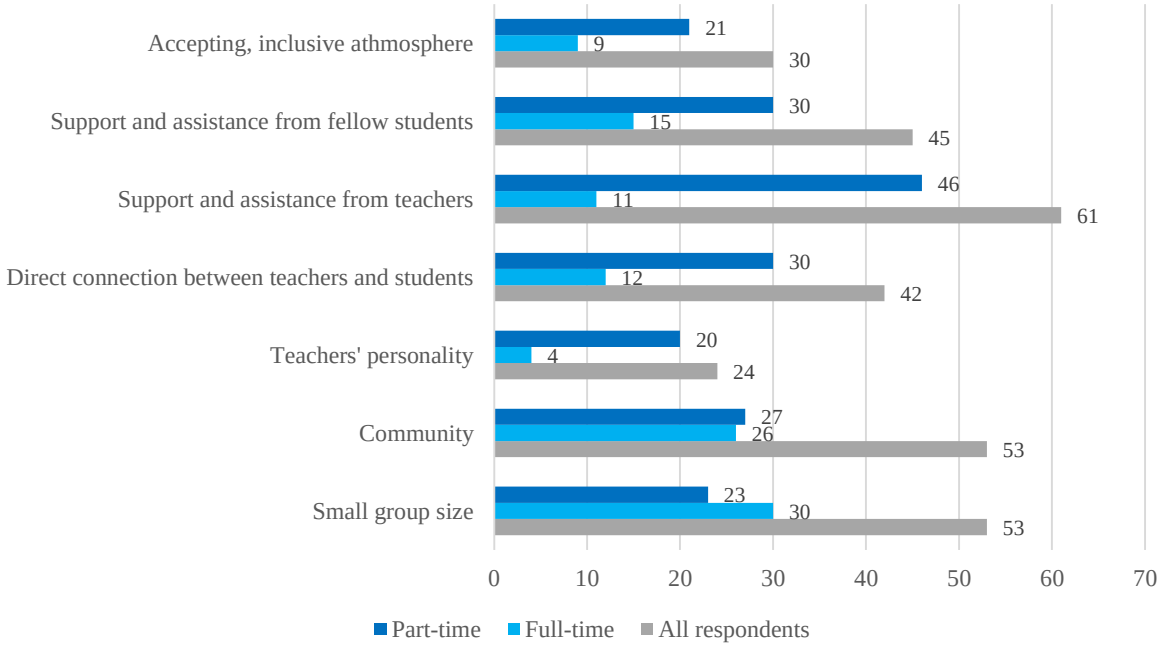
	FLA-INT5	FLA-INT4	FLA-INT3	FLA-INT2	FLA-INT1
SC-PRE1	11	1	2	1	1
SC-PRE2	31	12	7	2	2
SC-PRE3	41	12	3	0	3
SC-PRE4	21	9	2	1	2
SC-PRE5	9	5	1	0	1
SC-PRE6	7	3	2	0	0
SC-PRE7	1	1	0	0	0

Test questions used to check the coherence of the answers show that respondents do not link the family-like environment and the supportive community in the everyday university life. It can be assumed that they use these terms as synonyms, or they mix them for their own interpretation. However, as results show, family-like atmosphere and supportive community are two different terms at the respondents at the admission decision. This result differs from the literature and the definition used by the Faculty of Pedagogy.
These results shows that the question must be examined from the side of the definition as the data on seeking and feeling the presence of values does not provide strong evidence on the link between these variables. The question is how they define the term "family-like atmosphere". At that point we must turn to the results of open questions and text analysis.



3. Figure: Key words for the definition of "family-like atmosphere"

All together there were seven categories how respondent identified the term:
small group size (53 mentions),
nature of community (helping, supportive, 'everyone knows everyone (53 mentions)
personality of the instructors (kind, helpful, approachable, humane) (24 mentions),
direct connection between teacher and student (42 mentions),
support and assistance from teachers (61 mentions),
support and assistance from fellow students (45 mentions),
accepting and inclusive atmosphere (30 mentions).



4. Figure: Definition of family-like atmosphere by study type

Support and assistance from the side of both fellow students and teachers are more tied to family-like atmosphere by part-time students than full-time ones. Part-time students also highlighted the teachers' personality and the accepting, inclusive atmosphere, and valued the direct connection between teachers and students. Only the community and the small size group as the definition of family-like atmosphere emerged among full-time students.

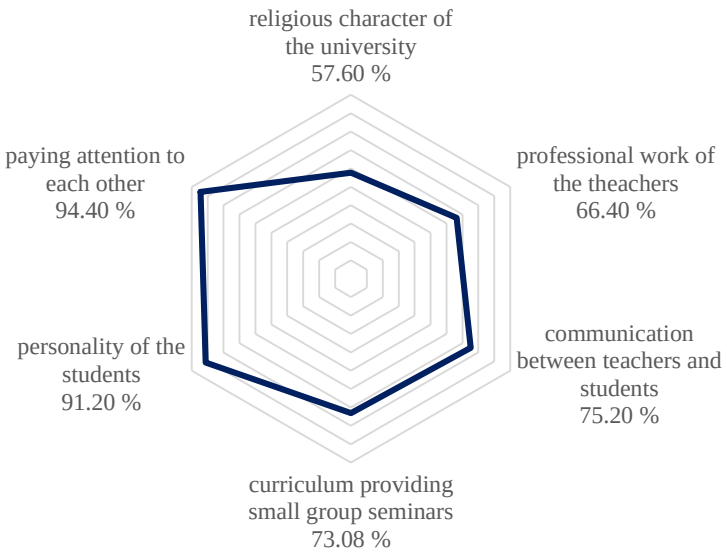
The definition of family-like atmosphere is quite diverse between full-time and part-time students. Part-time students mean rather support and close teacher-student relations by this term, while full-time ones link that more to the sense of community feeling. From the view of the characters of types of studies, it is obvious that full-time students who spend their entire week in the campus can form stronger personal relations and create their own community. However, part-time students highly mentioned the supportive environment what is also a character of communities. By students' terms, family-like atmosphere links to a kind of community feeling.

Contrary to the three definitions literature used, there are limited mentions in the term of cultural differences and inclusive pedagogies. Term of inclusive pedagogies appears as accepting and inclusive atmosphere. In this way, the answers link to the definition used by Cole et al. (1999) and Blašková et al. (2021) who focus on respect and acceptance as some answers show: "*The family-like atmosphere strengthens commitment, facilitates cooperation, and gives us the opportunity to ask, make mistakes and learn – because we know that we will receive support during our development." "There is a safe, accepting atmosphere, where it is easier to ask, speak up and develop."*

However, all elements of a supportive environment are lined up like Felder' (1993), and community, relations in the community, and the teacher-students relation as were emphasized by Snijders et al. (2020) and Hardy & Bryson (2016).

Small group size and development of community also appear in the answer (i.e. everyone know everyone, there are closer relations thanks to smaller groups, and directness is also present).

The definition of family-like atmosphere from the side of qualitative interviews could lead us closer to the answer the main question: How family-like atmosphere is defined in the Faculty? The interviewees primarily associated the family-like atmosphere with the pedagogy of attention. By this, support and attention to each other become the focus. In the case of a family-like atmosphere, students connect the supportive community more with the concept of a family-like atmosphere through the elements of inclusive pedagogy.

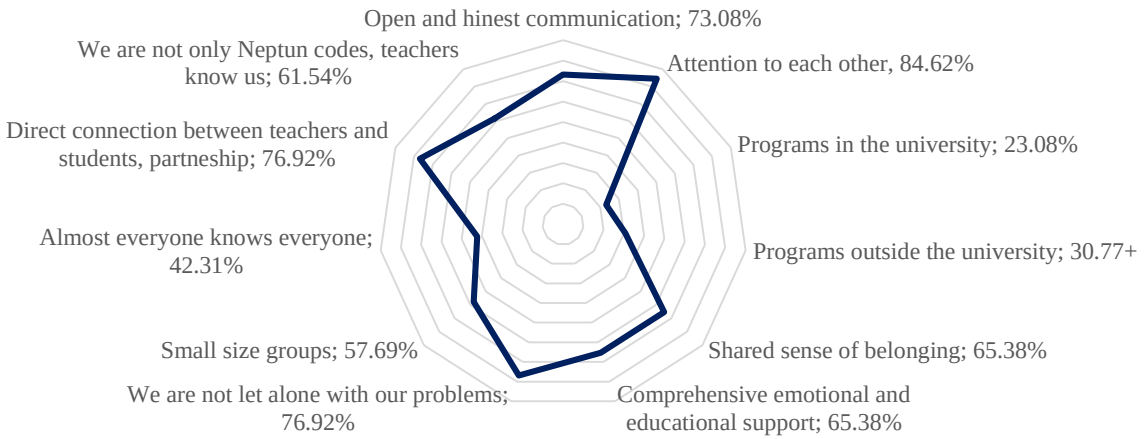


5. Figure: To what extent the following elements have role in family-like atmosphere? (%)

When students had to determine the elements, they identified with the family-like atmosphere within their own group, the attention to each other and the personality of the students got the highest ranks. This was followed by the direct communication between teachers and students and the curriculum providing small group seminars.

In this way, supportive environment appears as a synonym of family-like atmosphere. All this confirms the results of the questionnaire covering the entire student population, when the perception of a supportive atmosphere and a familiar environment were in strong relations. The concepts defined by the Faculty are combined by the students in their answers. Protestant theology-based, student-centred elements and attention to each other are present in the answers. Part-time interviewees highlight the attention to each other among students, as well.

We asked the students to give a definition on the most relevant aspects of family-like atmosphere. The 26 interviewees provided long descriptions, so all together 11 categories were set due to the numbers of total mentions. Literature gives a threefold definition for the term, and the supportive nature was the closest to the students' answers. The "Paying attention to each other", the "Direct connection between teachers and students, partnership" and the "We are not only Neptun codes, but teachers also know us" were the most mentioned. (Figure 6)



6. Figure: What family-like atmosphere means to you? (%)

Answers linked to multicultural nature and inclusive pedagogy were in minor position. Those, who mentioned them referred to supportive environment's key words. Results showed that making difference between supportive environment and family-like atmosphere is not so evident. Used key words like acceptance, secure environment, strengthen each other were the emotional and structural pillars of family-like atmosphere.

Interviewees gave answers about the effect of institution's size, types of courses and the role of teachers and students in line with family-like atmosphere. Almost all their answers were about the supportive, accepting and cohesive community. Many saw parallels between the functioning of the optimal family and the functioning of their own university group. (*"I think a family can function well if we really support each other. I feel the same about our group."*) They said that support does not mean only help in education, but it lives in human relations, too. Students do not leave each other alone and build on each other's strengths to fill in the gaps. They not just help each other but accept differences. Everybody has his or her own value and place in the community, all of them are important and valuable. In this way, family-like atmosphere is not only a pleasant feeling, but a safe and stable environment where learning, cooperation and development is easier.

However, there were more elements they highlighted. Importance of supportive environment was emphasized by all of them. As one student said *"family-like atmosphere is completely equal to supportive environment … I am always in an environment where I count count on the others."* This feeling gives them the feeling of being safe, increases self-confidence and promotes the learning process, too. It is essential for the respondents that the group members stand up for everyone, help and support each other in learning and in all other situations. At the same time, several students also mentioned that the same is their experience on several teachers, especially in the more personal, seminar sessions.

The role of teachers divides respondents, but most recognize its importance. Many think that the teacher's personality, openness, and communication style fundamentally determine the mood of the group. (*"The teacher creates the safe, open atmosphere in which the students can speak with confidence."*) At the same time, others believe that the atmosphere is determined

more by the active participation and openness of the student community. In this case, the instructor only helps but is not the only responsible factor for it.
The role of group size also appears as a key factor in the opinions. The respondents state that it is much easier to create a personal, familiar atmosphere at seminars with a smaller number of participants. In large number lectures, this can be lost quickly; the atmosphere often becomes more impersonal, and it is more difficult to give space to everyone. Many believed that the family-like atmosphere cannot be interpreted at the level of the whole institution, but rather in smaller units where everyone knows each other.
Acceptance and inclusion are also key elements. Many emphasized that "we accept each other despite social differences" and these differences do not play a role in a real family-like atmosphere – everyone is an equal member of the community. This acceptance also includes respecting and addressing intellectual and ability differences. Many respondents said that a true inclusive community can push these differences into the background, shadow them, and build rather on individual strengths.
Interviewed part-time student of Community organization BA programme showed the evidence of a living community. The university itself had a smaller role in creating this community that provides the family-like atmosphere, as interviewees feel. The everyday university life experience is much closer to the in-group experiences; they are not separated at all. Results show that family-like atmosphere is mostly linked to mutual support, acceptance, direct interpersonal relations and to the inclusive community itself. They also feel the importance of small size groups, the personality of the teachers and the attitude of fellow students to create this environment.



7. Figure: Key words for the definition of family-like atmosphere in the questionary



8. Figure: Key words for the definition of family-like atmosphere in the interviews

SUMMARY

Family-like atmosphere and supportive community are core values of the Faculty of Pedagogy of the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary that are used as admission campaign slogans, too. The study examined how the students of the Faculty think about these terms, how they determine them. The quantitative analysis showed that there is a strong link between them, however the students mix the definition in their own terms. Qualitative analysis pointed out that family-like atmosphere is defined like small group size, mutual support, close teacher-student relations and trust-based relationships. Part-time students emphasized teacher and fellow-student support, while full-time students the sense of community. Qualitative interviews with part-time students provided a deeper understanding of the definition they use. This highlighted close relation between the presence of the terms emphasising care, attention and acceptance. The results of the interviews highlighted that the elements that appear in the memoires of the students of the Nagykőrös Teacher Training Institution are still present at the Faculty of Pedagogy. A university with a human face, where attention, mutual respect and support appear in everyday life.

DISCUSSION

International literature identifies supportive environment and trust-based teacher-student relation are essential to student well-being and engagement (Hardy & Bryson, 2016; Snijders et al., 2020). While scholars state that institutional climate or inclusive pedagogy have primary role (Nieminen, 2022; Gale & Mills, 2013), the present research shows the added values are rather moral and spiritual rooted in Reformed Protestant traditions. In that way, family-like

atmosphere from the part of the students is not only a pedagogical or social term, but also a moral community experience described by mutual care and personal attention. Their definition is closer to Cole et al. (1999) and Felder (1993), who link it to genuine care and the moral dimension of the teaching progress. In the context of the Faculty, these values like human dignity and service are not only the parts of an emotional support system but are the mission of the Faculty. In that mean, the institutional model of KRE PK differs from secular higher education. The "pedagogy of attention" arose from the interview that echoes the Protestant educational ideal of personal calling and mutual responsibility.

Students, in line with Maymon (2019) and Blašková et al. (2021), linked small group size, direct teacher-student relation and the teachers' personal example to the definition of family-like atmosphere. In that way, when the Faculty emphasizes the supportive community, it does not a modern, student-centred education program, but is rooted in the traditions of Protestant education. Moreover, students' answers give a special perspective of the literature that link the term to cultural or social diversity (Lesyk & Kornieiev, 2021; Sagintayeva, 2024). Students' interpretation is rather about the emotional side of inclusion like acceptance, empathy or mutual understanding. Their answers show that even in a culturally homogenous environment, diversity exist, and inclusivity is the way for moral and emotional accessibility.

The research gives a new perspective to the international discourse on student well-being involving a theology-based Faculty and education. The care and attention of Reformed pedagogical tradition in this mean provides a functional model for student support and shows that traditional, faith-based values can remain relevant within contemporary, market-oriented higher education.

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