

Acting Rector of Corvinus: It is not true that we're pushing the stupid children of rich parents through!

TAMÁS NÓTIN, INDEX

31.10.2023 08:25

He has come forward in the interests of the university's prestige and reputation; he refuses the idea that favouritism is shown to any student; he believes that Associate Professor Zoltán Ádám, whose employment was terminated, did not tell the truth and has seriously breached his duties. We talked to Lajos Szabó, Acting Rector of the Corvinus University of Budapest

The background to the interview's topic can be summarised in the following headings:

1. This summer, the news came out that **Zoltán Ádám**, Associate Professor at the Institute of Economics of the Corvinus University of Budapest, initiated three ethics reviews against three university executives (one of them was the then Rector, Előd Takáts) at the beginning of the year because one of his students failed to meet the requirements of one of the subjects during the semester, but was still allowed to take the exam by completing a different test, separated from the others - "under irregular circumstances".

2. All three university executives were condemned by the ethics reviews at first instance, but were acquitted at second instance. In the case of the rector, a special ad hoc inquiry committee was set up by the Board of Trustees of the foundation maintaining the university. In fact, the rector's employer is not the University, but the Board of Trustees. In the case of the two other university executives - the then General Vice-Rector **Lajos Szabó** ruled on their acquittal and at the same time initiated an irregularity procedure.

3. In August, Zoltán Ádám gave an extended interview to [444.hu](https://www.444.hu) and among other things, he talked about how the student's mother had tried to get her child to be admitted to the exam in a dismal conversation, and even noted that her husband is a very important person, it would not be nice if he had to intervene in the matter. In the press it was also [published](#) that the family in question "owns a significant stake in Mol". Zoltán Ádám did not change his position, but the student was still allowed to take the exam.

4. At the Mathias Corvinus Collegium's (MCC) festival in Esztergom, the press (and thus [Index](#)) could ask questions from **Zsolt Hernádi**, CEO of Mol, who happens to be the President of the Board of Trustees of the foundation that maintains the university. On the exam scandal, he said that Zoltán Ádám (although he did not give his name) was "a party activist", who had "leaked the case for political purposes" and was "trying to make political capital out of it". Zsolt Hernádi also said that the student in question could take the exam after applying for equity, and he added on this subject that there are 100,000 exams and 1,000 applications for equity a year at the university. He explained that the university is not

about “messing with” students, but about ensuring that the talented students who come to Corvinus can graduate. In this particular case there were irregularities, but none of them were such that the student was to be punished. "The whole case is trifling in nature, there was no favouritism that really raises an ethical question," said Mol's CEO (his full response can be listened to from [51:35](#)).

5. Előd Takáts - who, shortly after the scandal broke out and the review was concluded [left](#) the rector's chair - in the interview granted to [Telex](#) also said that the student had submitted an application for equity, and that 99 percent of such (first) applications are approved, which is what happened in this case. According to Zoltán Ádám, this application for equity contained “false” information. Előd Takáts said that he did not know the family and the student was given a standard test. This solution was not accepted by Zoltán Ádám, which meant that an ethics review was undertaken. Előd Takáts explained his decision to resign by his wish to concentrate on his scientific and research work.

6. Another twist in the case: the outcome of the irregularity procedure initiated by Lajos Szabó - now acting rector - was that Zoltán Ádám's employment was [terminated](#) by extraordinary termination with immediate effect. Corvinus claims that the irregularity procedure was conducted in conformity with internal rules and [found irregularities in five areas](#). It was also communicated that as a result of the procedure, verbal and written warnings were issued, and employment was terminated for breach of employee's duty - “non-cooperation” committed during the procedure.

7. Zoltán Ádám claims that he has not been found guilty of any professional misconduct or offence, the university's management was looking for an opportunity to get rid of a critical voice. He stated to [RTL](#) that his dismissal "has an intimidating effect on the university". This is what he said: "It is sheer intimidation, it is sheer terror."

8. Zoltán Ádám's dismissal caused a stir at the university ([and beyond](#)), the trade union convened a staff forum where the majority agreed that they should take action against the dismissal of their colleague. The forum was also attended by the university's management, and [their communication](#) stated that: The termination of Zoltán Ádám's employment was not due either to the ethics reviews or irregularities, but “because he did not make available the correspondence necessary to establish the facts, the whole truth and clarify his role, even after having been requested to do so five times during the irregularity procedure”.

In an interview given to our newspaper, Acting Rector Lajos Szabó spoke about the exam scandal, the ethics procedure, the irregularities and the dismissal of Associate Professor Zoltán Ádám.

Did you or any of the university's executives come under pressure during the case?

No, there was no pressure. But we should clarify what the case covers what it does not cover, because the press has only presented one part of it to the public, and not the other. For the sake of clarity, it is crucial to consider the whole case.

Was there no pressure from the Board of Trustees of the maintaining foundation?

There has never been any pressure from the Board of Trustees or any of its members, either on or for organisational or individual issues. All the regulations are available on the university's website, including the powers of the university and the Board of Trustees, the kind of decisions that are adopted by the Board of Trustees and those taken by the university. For instance, the Study and Examination Regulations stipulate the circumstances, the manner and the procedure of conducting examinations. This regulation is adopted by the university's Senate and has nothing to do with the Board of Trustees.

Have you not experienced pressure from the outside in any other way?

No. At another university, I was Head of Department from 2006, Vice Dean from 2007 to 2012, and Dean from 2012 to 2015, before joining the Corvinus University of Budapest. Here, I served as Vice-Rector from 2018, and have been Acting Rector from summer 2023. Neither in my previous job nor here did I ever sense any intention to influence.

Do you consider it as exerting pressure that a parent tried to put pressure on one of your lecturers to allow her child to take the exam, referring to the family's influential background?

It is very inappropriate for a parent to interfere in any way in the life of the university, whether by asking for information about an adult student's academic affairs or by trying to put pressure on anyone. A lot of well-known and influential persons have family members studying here, moreover, we have some influential persons in our postgraduate programmes. So a lecturer should not be influenced at all by someone who is a well-known and influential person, or a relative - in either a positive or negative way. All lecturers must immediately reject any attempt at influence by parents!

In this particular case, the parent did try to put pressure on the lecturer.

It was not the right thing to do, and this must be rejected! It should also be pointed out that it is strictly forbidden for our lecturers to communicate with third parties about students' results and academic status, including parents, because they are of age. And Zoltán Ádám should have known that. Of course, if, for example, a student is in hospital and cannot deal with an administrative matter, they can act with a formal authorisation, but otherwise parents or relatives cannot intervene on the student's behalf. This is true for all parents.

I WOULD TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO ASK THEM NOT TO COME HERE TO TAKE ACTION IN THEIR CHILD'S AFFAIRS, AND WE HAVE ALSO DRAWN THE LECTURERS' ATTENTION TO THAT.

It is unfortunate that this has happened in this particular case. Zoltán Ádám communicated with the parent in writing, orally, in the presence of the student and without him being present. This constitutes an irregularity.

"We are not talking about one student, but two"

Exactly why did you initiate an irregularity procedure if there were acquittals at the end of the ethics reviews?

Ethics reviews have looked at whether a student had been positively discriminated in terms of both the assessment of assignments given during the year and in the examinations, in a way that has resulted in an unfair advantage, and if so, whether this has been because he is the child of influential parents. The final resolution was that no ethical abuse had been committed in the case by one of the colleagues concerned and that no such abuse could be proven in the case of the other colleague. This decision was challenged in court by Zoltán Ádám, but there was less press coverage of the fact that the application was rejected at first instance.

This was announced in a university press release.

Yes, but Zoltán Ádám does not emphasise this.

Why did you launch the irregularity procedure?

If any irregularities or suspicious cases are detected in the operation of the system, the university is obliged to investigate the reported problems. Two notifications of irregularities were made after the closure of the ethics cases. As I was acting at second instance in the ethics case, one of the notification of irregularities was made by me, the other by the chairperson of the ethics committee acting at first instance. We both made the notification because of the cases involving suspected irregularities.

What are the irregularities in question?

There were several irregularities of minor gravity, for example concerning the content or recording of the subject datasheets.

BUT A PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FACT - BECAUSE IT HAS NOT BEEN REPORTED IN THE PRESS AT ALL - IS THAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE CASE OF NOT ONE, BUT TWO STUDENTS.

Students must also complete various assignments during the year in order to be admitted to the exam. Among other things, they can complete twelve quizzes relevant to the subject

using an electronic interface and must pass at least eight of them to be admitted to the exam. Students are divided into seminar groups. Each group has a seminar leader and each group has a so-called operational coordinator, who in this case was one of the seminar leaders. It is his/her responsibility to aggregate the students' scores and discuss with colleagues who can and who cannot take the exam. The student involved in the ethics procedure, let's call him "Student A", who had only completed seven quizzes, appealed to his seminar leader, Zoltán Ádám, to grant him a make-up quiz. Zoltán Ádám rejected this, consulted the operational coordinator, who also said that the quiz could not be made up. The reason given was that the subject datasheet did not allow for making up the quizzes. I would add that in previous years, every student always had an opportunity to improve their result or take a make-up quiz. However, Student A has now been denied this.

Was this the case that led to the ethics procedure?

Yes. As suggested to him, Student "A" finally applied for dean's equity. Indeed, at some point in their studies, everyone is entitled to an opportunity on the grounds of equity if they have missed something, or if they have not paid attention to or have not done something well. The Dean may take this into account and grant the opportunity to improve the results or take a make-up test. The Dean, who was approached by Student A, has already dealt with thousands of such requests and has established that this student may also be eligible for a make-up.

According to Zoltán Ádám, this application for equity contained "false" information.

We are student-centred. Everyone can make a mistake or fail to do something, and this applies not only to Student A, but to all the others. This was the principle applied by the Dean when the application was granted. Student "A" improved his result, completed the eight quizzes and was allowed to take the exam.

"That is not about two e-mails"

What about the other student case mentioned and how is it linked to the irregularity procedure?

The inquiries revealed that there was also a Student B who, at the same time as student A, asked the seminar leader to be granted a make-up quiz. This student had also completed seven quizzes successfully and wanted to get a chance to improve her result. She was given the opportunity to make up the quiz without submitting a request and she also passed the eight quizzes.

But what does Zoltán Ádám have to do with the case of Student B?

This is what the irregularity procedure was trying to find out. The committee that conducted heard the operational coordinator of the subject and asked him if Zoltán Ádám knew about it, if he was involved in the case of Student B, whereas a day later Student A was denied the opportunity to improve his result. As a matter of fact, Zoltán Ádám answered no, but the operational coordinator of the subject answered yes. A confrontation then took place, at which the subject's operational coordinator was rather embarrassed and nervously replied that "he was not completely sure". Audio recordings were made and minutes were drawn up of these hearings. The committee wanted to investigate the role each of the actors had played in this discriminatory case. Namely, if Student B was legitimately allowed to improve her results, then Student A was discriminated against, as he was not allowed to do so. If it was justified that Student A was not allowed to improve his result, then positive discrimination occurred in the case of Student B. It would not have been possible to differentiate between students, but it did happen.

After the irregularity procedure, Zoltán Ádám had to leave. According to the university's statement, his employment was terminated for breach of duties, i.e. non-cooperation. He claims that he was not found guilty of any professional misconduct or offence, and that at the end of the procedure his other colleagues received only verbal warnings or reprimands. Why was such a serious decision taken in the case of Zoltán Ádám?

The committee had a duty to find out the entire truth and to clarify the role of the lecturers in the case of Students A and B. However, Zoltán Ádám was not cooperative in this process. Despite repeated requests, he refused to send the full correspondence necessary for the inquiry, which would have offered clarity on who had known what, what they had consulted on and what decisions they had taken. While he said that he had sent all the emails, the committee found that he had not. Later, after the irregularity procedure had been closed, he said that not all the emails had indeed been sent, referring to technical reasons.

BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE THAT IS ALSO CRUCIAL TO THE CASE, BUT WHICH HAS NOT BEEN REPORTED IN THE PRESS.

The Moodle e-learning system is a platform accessible for both teachers and students, including the possibility to share learning materials and assignments due during the year. In all cases, this system logs the lecturers' access, which can thus be traced. The committee checked who logged in and allowed her to access the make-up task when the make-up quiz was taken by Student B. Interestingly, on the very day in question, in the time slot when Student B was given the opportunity to make up the quiz, Moodle reported a "technical error", i.e. the digital record of the make-up was no longer available. However, the successfully completed make-up quiz could be retrieved from the backend database.

And how could this technical error occur?

Those are the facts so far, and then it's up to everyone to decide for themselves why a system that has been stable for many years should have a technical failure at this particular time.

Are you suggesting that Zoltán Ádám had anything to do with it?

I am not suggesting anything, I don't want to get into conspiracy theories. May I note, however, that he had already filed a political submission during the ethics procedure of first instance addressing the original case, stressing that corruption is present here and that students are admitted to exams illegally. He continued this political narrative as long as he was able to appear in the press as a champion of truth. As soon as he and his colleagues started to feel uncomfortable with the irregularity procedure, he claimed that there was a technical problem.

Zoltán Ádám told the press that he did not send over two e-mails and that he cooperated in every way, although he admitted he was not very polite to the chancellor in charge of the procedure. That doesn't sound like something that should have led to his dismissal.

He wasn't cooperating in fully exploring the facts and now defends himself by saying that he did not realise that there was a technical error, because the two emails that the committee was looking for happened to be the ones that were missing for some technical reason from the email stream that he forwarded.

The person responsible for the technical problems cannot be identified, but was it justified to terminate his employment just because he failed to send over some emails?

The Labour Code is very clear on that point and I think the university has taken a proportionate decision and one that takes full account of the law. We are not talking about two e-mails. Zoltán Ádám has not cooperated in the university's efforts to find out who is responsible for this discriminatory case.

But do you see that to outside observers this may look like a trumped-up procedure?

Because they have only read the version of the case presented by Zoltán Ádám. But in the meantime, there are the hard facts.

BEFORE ANYONE EXPRESSES AN OPINION, PLEASE TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT ZOLTÁN ADAM HAS SO FAR PRESENTED THIS CASE IN A ONE-SIDED WAY.

What is it like to allow one student to do something that you don't allow another? No student should gain an advantage or suffer a disadvantage on account of their financial or family

circumstances. This is why it would have been important to explore the case, but Zoltán Ádám did not facilitate this.

"This already affects the reputation of the university"

Zoltán Ádám also said that he enjoyed trade union protection and could only be dismissed if they agreed. However, he said that the university's management circumvented this by accusing him of breaching his duties because they wanted to silence him, a critical voice. What is your answer to this?

The number of colleagues that may be granted trade union protection and whose employment cannot be terminated by ordinary termination, only with the agreement of the trade union, is stipulated by law and depends on the total staff number. There are two such colleagues, one of the protected lecturers was indeed Zoltán Ádám. But there is no link between his critical attitude and the termination of his employment.

Was the irregularity procedure in no way influenced by his political position?

No. Zoltán Ádám has in fact sued the university's management in other cases without this having resulted in adverse consequences for him.

ANYONE IS FREE TO EXPRESS THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS, BUT THEY CANNOT CLAIM THAT THEIR VIEWS ARE THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF THE UNIVERSITY.

In the press, several Corvinus colleagues have expressed their own convictions, including many who are critical of the government and sympathetic to it. There are no restrictions on the part of the university. Zoltán Ádám was also able to give his opinion on the model change without any consequences.

What happens now? How do you expect this case to proceed?

I am no prophet, but obviously I sense there is a big outcry. If it was true in the way Zoltán Ádám portrayed it in the press, I would be outraged by what is being written about this case.

BUT WHAT ZOLTÁN ÁDÁM SAYS IS NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH, NOT EVERYTHING HAPPENED AS HE SAYS. HE HAS MADE ONE-SIDED AND MANIPULATIVE STATEMENTS THAT OBSCURE THE TRUTH, AND I AM SPEAKING UP NOW BECAUSE IT IS AFFECTING THE REPUTATION OF THE UNIVERSITY.

If an eighteen-year-old secondary school student and his parents read in the press that the children of influential people are being pushed through the exams here, will they choose Corvinus University for further studies? There is simply no truth to the narrative that here we are pushing the stupid children of rich parents through, and we must reject that on behalf of our students. Only excellent, talented students with very high scores are admitted.

Isn't it then true what Zoltán Ádám said, that this case implies that this university "allows favouritism"?

No! We very strongly reject any kind of favouritism and we will not allow it to happen. It was the negative or positive discrimination that we wanted to fully explore. This is what Zoltán Ádám's behaviour hindered. But we are also student-centred, which is what equity is all about. We help students in the same way, but not in an unprincipled way. The principle of equal treatment is one of the cornerstones of the university.

“We firmly reject the idea that innocent students are being subjected to unfounded accusations in a highly publicised ethics case.”- goes one of the releases of the university. What accusations have you referred to?

One reading of the case, as suggested by Zoltán Ádám, is that the child of a family with a "significant stake in Mol" was favoured. Well, Mol is a corporation. More than one student has relatives and parents working for this company. Speculation began to spread around the university as to whose child Student A might be, and students who were known to have some form of family connection to the corporation began to be harassed and verbally abused.

THERE WERE STUDENTS WHO ASKED THE UNIVERSITY FOR HELP AND PROTECTION. VERY SERIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE WAS INFLICTED ON THE ABUSED STUDENTS. I THINK IF THIS CASE IS CLOSED ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THESE PSYCHOLOGICAL SCARS WILL TAKE A LONG TIME TO HEAL.

The university tried to provide all support, including mental health support, to the students who were attacked. Zoltán Ádám has particular responsibility in this regard as he leaked imperfect information without thinking about its implications. We and the students have had a very difficult time over the last few months, because due to personality rights we have not been able to say who we are talking about and who did what or who did not do what, while we have had to watch an otherwise ordinary exam being tabloidized. I have been in the field for thirty years, but I never dreamed that a student's failed quiz would keep us under siege at the institutional level.

"I feel very sorry for anyone who is influenced by this"

The University Staff Forum is demanding the reinstatement of Zoltán Ádám. Will you reconsider? Is there a way back?

Of course, Zoltán Ádám has the right to file an employment lawsuit or seek employment law assistance in this matter. We are law-abiding, but we are convinced that we have made a proportionate and lawful decision, we are ready to face any legal process.

Do you think that the solidarity with Zoltán Ádám could escalate to the point where more lecturers leave the university?

Colleagues are proud to work at Corvinus University. It is the country's leading university for economics, business and social sciences, and has now achieved considerable international success. Colleagues are given all the support and help they need to develop, research and teach at an even higher level, and we also implemented a big salary adjustment scheme. I don't think that in Hungary today one can get a much better opportunity than at Corvinus.

So you are not afraid of resignations?

There may be some who think on an emotional basis that they are quitting. But I hope colleagues will see that this case has gone beyond the boundaries within which it should have been handled. It has become too tabloidised and political. I feel very sorry for anyone who is influenced by this, because I think that things are in place at the university and that the university needs quiet.

What message does this whole story convey to students and lecturers alike?

A lot of changes are taking place at the university because of the model change, and therefore mistakes have been made. The lesson is that these mistakes must be addressed immediately and calmly, and not used for personal or political ends. We should not denounce each other, immediately assuming malice, but we should discuss the problems. It is also a lesson that during a transformation, in times of change, there is always the potential for tension and uncertainty, which can only be resolved through mutual dialogue.