

# **Nationwide network of TalentPoints: The Hungarian approach to talent support**

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## **Abstract**

In 2006 a novel approach to talent support was promoted by several talent support programmes in Hungary. The new idea was a network approach. The nationwide network of so-called TalentPoints and its framework, the Hungarian Genius Program, gained substantial European Union funding in 2009, and today it is growing rapidly. A novel concept of talent is also used by the programme: it perceives everyone as potentially gifted. The Hungarian Genius Program organizes the festive events of Talent Days on regional, national and European levels, sets up Talent Support Councils and has introduced the Talent Loan programme.

## **Keywords**

Talent support network, TalentPoint, inclusion, Hungary

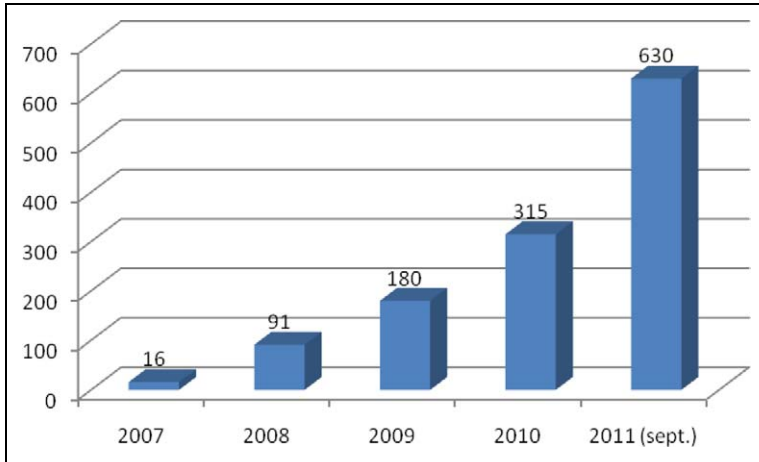
## **The role of talent during times of crisis**

The European Union (EU) is recovering from an economic crisis. If the recovery of Europe from the current crisis will not contain novel elements, Europe is unlikely to gain a competitive advantage over other continents. Talent is listed in the EU 2020 Strategy as a competitive value of Europe. Looking at the facts, Europe has a huge talent deficit.

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**Figure 1.** The number of TalentPoints is increasing rapidly.

Industries and governments are increasingly searching for talent and many people think we are in a war for talent. People tend to think that a crisis increases the competition *between* talents and *for* talents. Crisis develops a situation, where only the best, the genius, can survive, and they, as winners, will take all. These are widespread misconceptions. We have a large multitude of talents: not one, but hundreds, of talent pyramids. Moreover, the current crisis, and all the other crisis waves to come (water, energy, food, migration, etc.) will all create completely unexpected situations, for which we will require novel solutions. The unpredictable influences of the environment are amplified by the herding behaviour of the modern society. ‘Good customers’ go after the crowd, and their duplicated behaviour leads to decision avalanches, which make the outcome even more unpredictable. Survival of complex systems needs creative behaviour. Creative and talented people are our life insurance. There is no winner who will take all. We need a widespread cooperation of various talents to solve our major problems. And, do not forget, we do not know which type of talents we shall need next. Therefore, we must treasure all talents.

We often think that talent just grows, but this is not true. Talent is often hidden, and it needs discovery, support and networks. The modern concept of talent states that anyone may conceal a talent. Talent can be compared to an iceberg because the vast majority of it is hidden and waits to reveal itself only for a good occasion. Any one of us may hide a treasure of hidden talents, and good teachers know the secret words, ‘Open sesame!’, to liberate this magnificent energy. As many as one-third of our students may be talented in any class, and we never know which one will reveal his or her talent in the next month. Moreover, talent can be revealed at any time in our life. Each novel situation in our life – the birth of our children, our first year of retirement or the birth of our grandchildren – may all liberate hidden talents in us. As a summary, the word ‘untalented’ should be erased from our vocabulary forever! However, Europe has hundreds of thousands of gifted students who lose their chance to live a creative life by the end of their teenage years. This is an unacceptably large loss – a loss of our better future.

## **The network approach: a new idea**

Talent support will not lead to success if we are unable to teach our talented students to appreciate networking. Networking not only teaches us how to cooperate and introduces to us completely novel skills and information, but also lets us explain our own talent – in a thousand different ways.

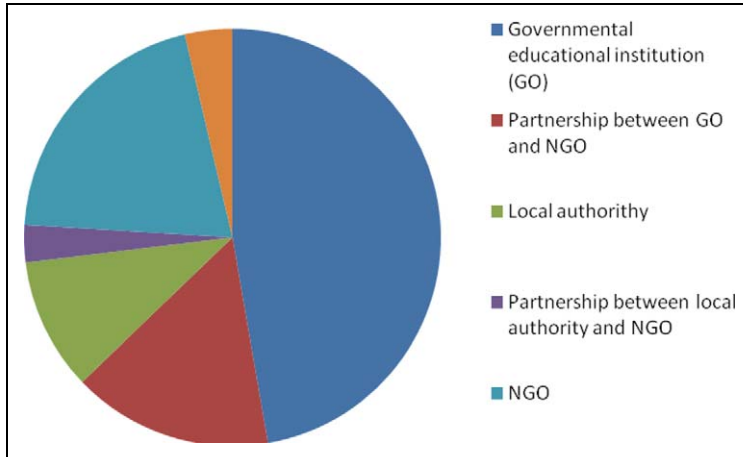
There are excellent talent support programmes throughout Europe. However, most of these programmes work alone rather than as part of a mutually supporting network. Thousands of gifted children living in small villages, in underprivileged circumstances, such as Roma, or in broken families remain undiscovered. Not only is this morally unacceptable, but it also wastes reserves that are essential to meet the novel challenges of this century. Even if they were successfully started, talent careers often break. The talented child changes town or school, and no information about her talent is carried on to the new place. He or she may not have the perseverance to fight for her recognition again and again. Many times the success of well-developed talents is prevented at the final step: the talent is unable to make proper contacts with the ‘industry’, with the entrepreneurs who may convert her superb skills to a profit for all.

The Hungarian National Talent Support Council was established in 2006. The Council is a non-governmental umbrella organization that coordinates talent support cooperation in Hungary and neighbouring countries. It has 28 member organizations. The membership criteria for eligible organizations are as follows:

1. performs at least a two-level selection of talented young people below 35 and continuously helps the work of these talented young people or their organizations (or helps organizations that perform such activities);
2. works with at least 100 talented young people;
3. works not only locally but in multiple regions or nationwide;
4. works continuously, at least in the last 2 years;
5. has selection and help of talents as an officially declared element;
6. is a legal entity.

In 2008 the Hungarian Parliament accepted (with only seven opposing votes) a 20-year National Talent Support Program, and a National Talent Fund was also established to support the activities. This fund receives 5 million euros each year from the national budget and an additional 1.5 million euros from citizens’ tax donations in the first year, doubling to 3 million euros in the second year and doubling again to 6 million euros in the third year. The Fund ([www.tehetsegprogram.hu/node/54](http://www.tehetsegprogram.hu/node/54)) is open for additional donations. It is very important to remark that talent support is not a luxury investment for us maintain despite the economic crisis; it is a key element of the long-term response to crisis. The programmes are trust-, motivation-and achievement based, and not selection based. They promote dialogue, networking and self-organization.

The Hungarian Genius Program ([www.geniuszportal.hu](http://www.geniuszportal.hu)) is an EU-supported part of the National Talent Support Program run by the Hungarian Talent Support Council between 2009 and 2011. The core of this programme is the development of a talent support network in the whole Carpatian basin, including Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine.



**Figure 2.** The proportions of the different types of institutions that may fund a TalentPoint.

Within the frame of the Genius Program, in the last 4 years more than 600 TalentPoints were established to help talented students recognize and develop their abilities (Figure 1). Such TalentPoints are nurseries, schools and universities, but may also be chess clubs, soccer teams, carpentry shops and even penitentiaries. A TalentPoint not only runs its own talent support programme, but also serves as an information centre. Anyone who is a promising talent candidate can visit TalentPoints and seek for advice and help. Members of the TalentPoint will help to assess the level of talent and find adequate support. A TalentPoint is responsible for the following four main tasks: talent identification, talent support, talent counselling and cooperation in the network. This is a grassroots movement and each week at least a dozen more new TalentPoints wish to register. TalentPoints form a network and help each other. TalentPoints that were established earlier provide assistance to less experienced members, and encourage the creation of new ones. These TalentPoints have discovered more than 26,000 talents over the last 2 years. TalentPoints and all other talent support options are listed on the TalentMap of Hungary and neighbouring countries website (<http://geniuszportal.hu/tehetsegterkep>).

TalentPoints are of diverse institutional backgrounds, representing 11 segments of the educational sector including public, church-owned and non-governmental institutions. Figure 2 shows the proportions between the various types of institutions that can form a TalentPoint.

Above the network of TalentPoints the Hungarian Genius Program calls into existence regional Talent Support Councils – public bodies guarding professional standards and coordinating activities in their respective regions. So far, 50 regional, cross-regional and domain-specific Talent Support Councils have been established within and outside the borders of Hungary. The primary tasks of the members of Talent Support Councils are to organize talent support activists; take part in decision-making related to talent support; organize Talent Days and conferences and participate in them; and organize discussions for TalentPoints and Talent Workshops, promoting the initiatives of talented youth.

Hungarian teachers and professionals working at the TalentPoints are welcome to participate in various training opportunities for free so they can be provided with information about the new talent support methods and developments in the field. Training courses of 10–30 hours have been developed and accredited in over 100 subjects to bring concepts and methods of gifted and talented education into the mainstream, and thus to reinforce the professional talent support work. The courses may be attended in all regions of the country. A broad range of skills, tools and techniques are introduced, strengthened and practised during the training. These involve the exchange of experience and knowledge, as well as programmes for those who deal with talented people in developing communities, and awareness-raising courses aimed at the families and environment of young pupils, on the educational, emotional and social needs of children showing special aptitude in one or more subject(s). The aims of the courses are not only the exchange of information but to produce and develop the professional methodology required for teaching talents. The next stage is the development of resources for improving the leadership, innovation and managerial skills of talented youth.

During one year, more than 9500 teachers and other talent support professionals, comprising 526 groups, have studied in the Hungarian Genius Program courses. By the end of the programme the number of participants will have reached 15,000.

The Genius Program organizes and promotes the concept of Talent Days, festive events focusing public attention on gifted people and talent support. The first Talent Days of 2006 have since grown into a movement: several towns and local communities joined the movement and organized their own Talent Days. The programme has organized around 500 events in 2011, involving at least 50,000 people in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine. These Talent Days are partly professional meetings, at which experts, programme leaders and those who support talents can meet. On the other hand, talented young people may also introduce themselves at such occasions. Talent Days are events at which local communities can thank talent supporters – teachers, experts, mentors, artist teachers and coaches. These occasions can turn the attention of the public to unfolding talent and promising youth, and they can strengthen everybody's willingness to realize their potential and give recognition to the committed work of talent supporters. Talent Days also indirectly contribute to challenging social myths related to gifted and talented people, and promote the idea that everybody has some talent. Community recognition is given to a diversity of talents – from handicrafts, to people with high social and emotional intelligence, to more traditional fields of talent related to school subjects, and to talent support in society at large. Talent Days have been organized in Hungary and neighbouring countries since 2006. They are usually held on or around 25 March, as a tribute to the talent and achievement of the world-famous Hungarian composer and pianist Béla Bartók, who was born on this date in 1881.

The Genius Program also started to develop financial grants to support various forms of education of high achievers, with the aim of creating a Talent Loan to provide resources to gifted, but underprivileged, children. The Talent Loan draws on the concept of the successful Student Loan scheme, which has been available to students in the higher education system in Hungary for many years. The loan can be used for tuition fees, to finance courses abroad or to provide reasonable educational conditions. An example from sports: if someone has been a winner several times, he or she can find

sponsorship more easily – but who will sponsor his or her very first world event? The real task is to finance this, something that the families of many young talents cannot afford. A special form of the Talent Loan will be developed to meet the needs of extraordinary talents, who often need extraordinary amounts of financial support (e.g. for a top-level violinist to be able to purchase a quality instrument) and who will have a high chance of paying this back later.

Dr László Balázs, Chief Executive Officer of Volksbank, Hungary, the head of the working group on Talent Loans, gave details about the concept:

We start from that fact that enterprises have a kind of embryonic stage, when they must be supported, since they have not yet fully reached their market; in the same way, the developmental phase of these talents can have an embryonic stage, when they are unable to finance themselves. But talent carries a promise like a vine-root for a wine-grower. Winegrowers also need faith; they must believe that the wine-root will turn productive in four years' time, the wine will mellow into high quality wine – and the work and money invested will be recovered in eight years. It takes time to realize the potential of a talent leading to social and economic value: from the recognition of talent through the development stage to employment. One might be an artist, a scientist or a blue-collar worker with a talent which emerged from vocational education; when this person has matured, s/he will see the fruits of his/her labour. This 'vintage', in economic terms, is the income, from which the talent can pay back his/her loan. It is important to give a loan and not a present so that the selected talent should feel responsible for it. We advance the fulfillment of this person, and later, when they are productive, they should pay the loan back to society.

## Novel concept of talent support

According to Renzulli, the famous American psychologist (<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/>), talent is the interaction of intellectual ability (intelligence), a high level of creativity (originality) and a high level of task commitment (diligence, persistence). The structure of efficient talent support can be represented by a pyramid, in which exceptionally gifted young people receive possibilities, while at the lower layers of the pyramid upward transitions are heavily promoted. This novel concept of talent support extends the earlier 'talent base' of the top 1% of 'geniuses', including at least one-third of the total population, and thus greatly improves the chances for underprivileged gifted young people. The novel concept perceives everyone as potentially gifted, completely removes the stigma of 'untalented' as scientifically improvable, and instead of rigid elitism greatly improves social mobility. Loyal to our motto that 'talent can hide in each one of us', the Hungarian Genius Program tries to motivate young Hungarians to realize their full potential, and, in doing so, make them happier and more responsible members of society.

The most important tasks of successful talent support are:

1. finding the type of talent our student has;
2. discovering how to nurture it in an optimal way;
3. suggesting an order of different talents and selecting one that should be developed first;

4. organizing support from family, friends, etc; and
5. allowing recreation and a normal human life.

Our talents are also children; they need time to play, find joy and love. However, we should not forget about ourselves, the talent supporters and teachers. Our own burn-out is a very common problem, which we are not recognizing. This neglect leads to imperfect support, and may even cause personal tragedies. Talent support is not self-sacrifice. It gives a tremendous amount of joy, self-knowledge and self-development to the mentor. But these joyful events can take place only if teachers do not overburden themselves.

### **Eliminating the weak points of the network**

An extensive survey from the summer of 2010 revealed that one of the greatest challenges faced by the TalentPoint Network is to decrease the competitiveness, lack of trust and parallel work between organizations in the network. This challenge points out the necessity of helping individual organizations to reframe the narratives they tell themselves, leaving a competitive approach behind, and helping them realize and value the interconnectedness with other talent support initiatives.

As a means of supporting the progress of talent professionals via methodology and also to provide the materials for our conferences and courses, the Genius Program develops resources and offers several publications on topics related to talent support. A wide variety of tools and techniques are introduced to the reader in a range of subjects, balanced with some works on more theoretical aspects of the area. These include aptitude and behavioural assessment, methods of mentoring, development of critical and reflective thinking, guidance on talent support in specialist fields, the role of talent care in integration and the development of entrepreneurial and project management skills. These materials are available free in electronic and printed forms.

### **The TalentPoint network on the European level**

The idea of talent support networks spreads: our initiative to hold the first European Talent Day ([www.TalentDay.eu](http://www.TalentDay.eu)) was picked up by several member states of the EU. In April 2011 the first EU Presidential Conference on talent support took place in Budapest since the European presidency in Hungary set talent support as one of the top priority topics. Consequently, the issue gained a European dimension and recognition. Experts and government officials of 24 European countries listed their best practices in talent support. Participants of the conference accepted the Budapest Declaration on Talent Support, which calls for EU member states to establish an EU network of TalentPoints and to celebrate European Talent Day. In 2012 an EU Talent Support Center will be established in Budapest, serving the organization of EU-wide cooperation in talent support. Ireland was the first to declare a National Talent Awareness Day, but the governments of Poland, Denmark and Finland and experts in Germany and the UK are also building talent support networks. So far, 10 European countries have joined this movement. Hungarian European Parliament members will submit a proposal for a non-legislative

action promoting talent support in the end of 2011 to the European Parliament. For further information visit the website ([www.talentday.eu](http://www.talentday.eu)).

We hope that through these efforts Hungary will develop its century-long talent support traditions (having several Nobel Laureates, world-known musicians and sportsmen), and will become a talent-friendly society by 2020.

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### **Author biographies**

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