



Learning how to Learn: How one online course taught thousands to learn. A personal story of systemic change

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ABSTRACT HEAD

At the University of Szeged, educators noticed that many first-year students lacked effective learning strategies. In 2016, they introduced a diagnostic assessment covering key subjects and learning habits. Results showed that students often relied on memorisation—effective in high school but inadequate for university—leading to low performance and dropout risks.

Faced with limited resources, the university sought scalable solutions. They discovered Learning How to Learn (LHTL), an online course by Barbara Oakley and Terrence Sejnowski, which introduces neuroscience-based learning techniques like the Pomodoro method and focused vs. diffuse thinking. However, language was a barrier. With support from Coursera and volunteers, a fully adapted Hungarian version launched in 2020—the first Hungarian-language MOOC on Coursera.

LHTL was integrated into university life: it became a 2-credit elective and a recognised element of the national admissions scoring system. From 2024, completing LHTL adds five points to an applicant's score. The course also reached high school and adult learners, fostering early awareness of effective study habits.

Quantitative data supports LHTL's impact: students who took the course had higher grades, better course completion rates, and lower dropout rates. A longitudinal study is planned to better understand causality and long-term benefits.

Beyond academic outcomes, LHTL changed institutional attitudes toward online education. Its success led to the integration of more Coursera content, focusing on skills like communication and digital literacy. It also fostered a mindset shift: viewing learning as a trainable skill, not a fixed trait. Ultimately, LHTL proved that with the right tools and localization, online education can democratize learning and support systemic change in higher education.

Keywords: initial professional training, postgraduate qualifications, subject benchmarks career guidance

Learning how to Learn: A digital solution for university success

We have both been working in education for decades at the University of Szeged, Hungary. Our experience as schoolteachers, higher education professionals, and university leaders has shown us that first-year students often struggle not because of a lack of knowledge, but because their concept of learning—and the strategies they rely on—are poorly suited to the demands of university life.

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This story is not just about best practice. It is a deeply personal narrative of how one well-chosen digital course became the foundation for a broader institutional and societal shift in how we understand and support learning.

The challenge: systemic signs of learning deficits

In 2016, the University of Szeged introduced a diagnostic assessment for all incoming first-year students. The tests covered three compulsory secondary school graduation subjects—Hungarian language and literature, mathematics, and history—as well as natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics), which, while not compulsory, reflect a wide range of cognitive skills. A fifth test assessed English language proficiency—essential for academic literacy in all fields—and a sixth test focused on general problem-solving skills.

The assessment was accompanied by a short questionnaire, which asked students about their learning habits. After just a few years, results indicated that the vast majority of first-year students lacked effective learning strategies. Most relied heavily on repetition and memorisation, which had helped them succeed in high school but quickly failed them at university. The result? Low academic averages, growing dropout rates, and general frustration.

We began looking for a fast, scalable solution that could help thousands of students in their very first weeks of university, before they hit the academic wall.

It quickly became clear that traditional classroom-based interventions were impossible: we lacked the teachers, space, and resources. That was when we discovered Learning How to Learn2 (LHTL), a world-famous online course developed by Barbara Oakley and Terrence Sejnowski. Even then, millions of learners had already taken the course (by summer 2025, more than four million globally), which introduces how the brain works and how people can learn intentionally.

Grounded in neuroscience and pedagogy, LHTL is practical and empowering—it presents the Pomodoro technique, retrieval practice, and explains the dynamics of focused and diffuse modes of thinking.

There was one major obstacle: language. In 2019, the course was only available in English. To truly reach our students and achieve impact, we needed a Hungarian version.

Translating an American course: Cultural and technical adaptation

With university backing, a partnership with Coursera, generous support from Barbara Oakley, and a committed volunteer team, we completed the full Hungarian translation by January 2020. This wasn't just a technical translation—it was a cultural process. We had to ask: how can we reframe an American educational narrative within a Hungarian context while preserving its core message and scientific integrity?

The launch of the first Hungarian-language Coursera MOOC was a milestone. In the first semester alone, thousands of learners enrolled. The feedback remains overwhelmingly positive:

“It was fantastic, filled with new insights—thank you.”

“The perfect course to take before starting university—thanks to SZTE for the opportunity!”

Initiating independent learning: LHTL as a gateway course

Since then, Learning How to Learn has become an integral part of university life. The course is available as an elective worth two credits in every programme. But its impact goes far beyond credits. For many students, it is their first encounter with the idea that learning is not a fixed ability, but a skill that can be developed.

In recent years, Hungarian universities gained more autonomy in admission scoring. Our Senate voted to recognise LHTL in the national application process: from 2024 onward, completing the course adds five points to a prospective student's score, roughly 1% of the maximum. In addition, those who enrol at our university after completing LHTL are awarded two credits automatically.

Expanding LHTL to high school students was a strategic move. We aimed to influence students' learning attitudes before they arrived on campus. The course is also offered to upper-year students, and credit is granted automatically—no paperwork or formal application is required.

Beyond anecdote: What the data tells us

The LHTL success story is not just based on testimonials. In 2025, we launched a comparative study using the academic records of our first-year students. We examined the performance of students who had completed the LHTL course before or early in their studies, and compared them with peers who had not.

The results were consistent:

Grade average: LHTL participants had higher academic averages. The smallest difference was observed in Health Sciences, the largest in Science and Informatics.

Course completion: 71% of LHTL students completed all enrolled courses, compared to 59% of non-participants.

Dropout rate: 2% among LHTL students, versus 5% among others.

Of course, correlation is not causation. Factors such as student motivation, prior performance, and the impact of credit incentives require further examination. That's why we are preparing a longitudinal study: instead of comparing students to each other, we will examine individual changes over time, comparing students' academic performance *before and after* completing LHTL.

Our hypothesis remains: beyond increased confidence and satisfaction, we expect to see a measurable, lasting improvement in academic results.

More than a course: LHTL's broader impact on society

The Hungarian-language Learning How to Learn course is free and open to everyone, not just university students. As of summer 2025, more than 15,000 people have enrolled on the course, including middle and high school students, adult learners, and professionals.

LHTL also sparked a broader shift within our university. Inspired by its success, we have integrated four more Coursera courses into our curricula: skill-focused guided projects, professional certificates, and job-ready micro-credentials.

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For example, our Career Office conducted a regional needs assessment to identify the most important missing competencies. Based on the findings—communication, problem-solving, and digital literacy—we designed a credit-based learning path that any student can follow, regardless of major.

LHTL acted as a catalyst, proving that online learning, when thoughtfully integrated, can enhance academic success and equity in higher education, especially when high-quality, localised content is available.

Final thoughts: Learning as mindset, not just content

To us, Learning How to Learn is more than a course. It is a tool that helps learners build confidence, agency, and a sense of purpose in their educational journey. And that may be the most important learning outcome of all.

If we can help students—from high schoolers to PhD candidates—realize that learning is a skill they can improve, not just a standard they must meet, we will have done more than teach. We will have empowered.

About the University of Szeged

Founded in 1581, the University of Szeged (USZ) is one of Hungary's leading research universities. It serves over 24,000 students, including 5,000 international students across 12 institutes and a teacher training centre. Located in the sunniest city in Hungary, in the country's southern region, the university is proud to count two Nobel laureates among its alumni and professors: Albert Szent-Györgyi (vitamin C) and Katalin Karikó (mRNA-based vaccines)

Biographies

Lilla Kocsis PhD as the Head of the Department of Education Development at University of Szeged, Hungary, manages national and international educational initiatives, coordinates platform-based learning (e.g. Coursera, SZTE+), fosters collaboration through EUGLOH alliance, and works to enhance student engagement, and promote innovative educational practices.

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