

THESIS COLLECTION

Ábrahám Zsolt

**APPLICATION OF THE CASE METHOD IN THE
FIELD OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

The relationship between a transformative teaching method and skills development in
business education

Ph.D. thesis

Supervisor:

Dr. Erzsébet Czakó
Professor

Budapest, 2023

Department of Business Studies

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1. RESEARCH HISTORY AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

1.1. Justification of the research topic

According to Maxwell (2005), research goals include motivations, desires and goals related to research. In his opinion, it is important to understand our own goals as researchers, as these are the ones that guide the research work and support us in prioritizing our tasks. Research goals also help us to understand and reflect on the value creation related to the research work.

Based on Maxwell (2005), I identified the topic selection of the dissertation along three aspects - intellectual, practical, and personal. I describe them below:

1. *Intellectual aspect:* Case method and case-based education are closely related to the issue of problem solving and competence development. The application of the method can have significant contributions in the field of pedagogy, skill and competence development, recruitment and selection, and business development. In my research, I examine and explore the role of the case method in the development of problem-solving skills and abilities. To do this, I developed a comprehensive conceptual framework based on the case method, which can be used to develop problem-solving skills.
2. *Practical aspect:* Examining the application possibilities of the method is important not only from a scientific but also from practical point of view. The development of the conceptual framework involves the creation of several educational tools and models that help the method to be widely used. During the examination of problem-solving abilities, I would like to demonstrate what skills and competencies can be measured and developed.
3. *Personal aspect:* I have been dealing with case solving since 2008. As a university student, by completing the Business Economics Pyramid of the Corvinus University of Budapest, I had the chance to represent my university and our country at one of the world's most prestigious international case competitions. The competition organized by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2009 was followed by many other competitions that had a great impact on my professional development, my attitude to teamwork and my professional mindset. In 2012, after obtaining my master's degree, I founded the startup company Case Solvers, which has contributed to the development

of approximately 30,000 students through cca. 300 case-based trainings in 33 countries around the world. With our team, we organized more than 30 national and international level case competitions in the last 10 years. In the past decade and a half, I have therefore been able to actively deal with the case method and case-based skills development in several roles as a case solver student, university lecturer, case writer, case competition organizer and skills development trainer (Figure 1). During my research work and in my doctoral dissertation, I consciously built on this unique experience and strove for the validity expected by the scientific community.

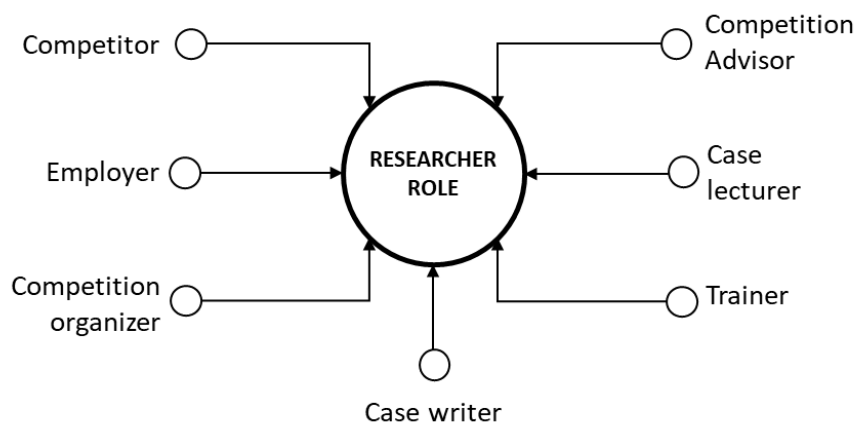


Figure 1: My researcher role
Source: Author's compilation

During the analysis of education through business case studies, the role of the researcher is also affected by other roles relevant to the topic. In relation to case-based education, I identified seven different roles (*competitor, case competition advisor, university instructor, development trainer, case writer, competition organizer, employer*) that had an impact on my research work.

As a case competition participant, I learned how to work under time pressure and learned to apply the knowledge I gained about a specific company problem in practice. I experienced working in a team, and also the atmosphere of domestic and international case competitions closely. As a case competition advisor, I have participated in preparing dozens of case teams for domestic and international competitions in the past 10 years. As a university lecturer, I integrated the case method into the teaching of the subjects I taught - business economics, applied business economics, cases on business economics, cases on international business strategy, international business economics. All of these involvements provided me with significant experience for the investigation of the application of the case method in domestic formal higher education. My work as a skills development trainer is related to my role as a

trainer in the educational startup company Case Solvers, where I had the opportunity to deal with talent management and skills development in the form of trainings in 33 countries around the world, often in very different cultural, social and educational environments. As the author of more than sixty business case studies, I learned how to design a case study, construct the related business problem, and organize relevant and less relevant information from the point of view of problem solving. As the founder of Case Solvers, I took an active role in organizing national and international case competitions at high school, university and young employee levels. What I experienced during competition organization helped me to better understand the motivation of the organizers, jury members and other external partners. As an employer, I see the expectations of students graduating from business schools and the skills they bring to the labor market.

1.2. Relevance of the research

Although the case method has a history of more than a hundred years in the world of business schools, today only a narrow segment of business schools uses it exclusively as a primary educational method. Social changes in recent decades have a significant impact on the development of the case method, and the widespread use of the method itself contributes significantly to the training of problem-solving citizens (Damnjanovic and Mijatović, 2017). The case method used in business schools is suitable for skill development and thus can have a significant impact on the functioning of future employees (Dlačić, Damnjanovic és Ribarić, 2017; Damnjanovic, Proud és Milosavljevic, 2020; Györfy, 2014; Ábrahám 2019).

The scientific investigation of the case method can be considered as relevant from three points of view:

1. With the spread of digitization and the Internet, explicit knowledge has become a commodity, and the labor market competitiveness is not anymore based on factual knowledge, but by the ability to apply it. Under the umbrella of digitization, gamification, robotization, machine learning and artificial intelligence are gradually coming to the fore, which, in addition to the spread of easily algorithmizable machine processes, further strengthen the need for complex problem-solving skills, such as critical thinking (Kapp, 2012). The quest for digitization was intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the players in the field of education and training faced new challenges (Ábrahám, 2021).

2. The role of higher education, including business schools has changed, in addition to the transfer of subject knowledge, the development of skills and competences has come to the fore. Well-functioning methodologies for measuring subject knowledge and knowledge existed, but the practical measurement, digitization and automation of competence and skills are still in their infancy (Aun, 2017; Ábrahám, 2022).
3. The labor market has changed, there is a labor shortage in many areas, which encourages businesses to develop new forms of recruitment and selection. Case competitions are a new form of competency-based recruitment and selection. In addition to the labor shortage, the skills gap between the skills expected by the actors of the labor market and the skills students possess graduating from higher education is constantly increasing, employers are placing more and more emphasis on the development of employees' skills (*upskilling*) (Chinn et al., 2020; Nohria, 2021).

Each of the three points of view listed has an impact on the future of business education and is a strong incentive to rethink the current pedagogical methods.

The research problem identified in my PhD studies consists of two parts. One is a more than hundred-year-old educational method used by elite business schools, the other is a pressure from the changing labor market and transformation of higher education. So there is an educational method which I argue that can be used in mainstream public and higher education (Ábrahám and Erőss, 2022). Although the topic of the case method has been elaborated by several authors in the past decades, the examination of its applicability in mainstream education is still incomplete.

My chosen research topic is relevant to three key areas: (1) higher education and the scientific community, (2) employers, and (3) students and employees. I describe them in the following three subsections.

1.2.1. The relevance of research for higher education and the scientific community

The research can be considered as relevant for the scientific community in three ways. On the one hand, business and pedagogical literature related to the case method is still little researched and not systematized these days. On the other hand, case method is still used by a few business courses as an educational methodology. By reviewing and organizing the literature related to the field, it becomes possible to use the common language and definitions used in education. Last but not least, by examining the connections between skills development and case method,

a tangible toolkit is put into the hands of colleagues who teach business case studies, write business case studies, and prepare for case competitions, which they can put into daily practice.

1.2.2. Relevance of research for students and employees

Examining the areas of application of the case method is relevant for both students and employees for two reasons. On the one hand, the learning and development experience of students is improved by the appropriate application of the case method in a varied form. The role-play related to the cases, the decision-making situations, the presentation, competition and cooperation are important elements of the method that increase the commitment and engagement of students and employees. In addition to improving the learning and development experience, during case-based skills development case solvers can develop a very tangible learning curve within a short time and acquire skills that they regularly use as employees in their everyday work.

1.2.3. Relevance of research for employers

Last but not least, the examination of the case study method in the field of skills development is also relevant for employers from two aspects. Firstly, the consistent application of the method can reduce the skills gap between applicants and the expectations of existing employers, and secondly, the correct application of the method can improve the accuracy of the company's recruitment process and increase the commitment of employees.

1.3. Research questions

The main research question of my PhD research: *What are the application forms of the case method in the field of skills development?* When formulating the research questions, I divided the research topic appropriately horizontally and vertically.

The individual publications deal with the sub-questions examined during my research in more detail in the following topic breakdown:

1. *Introductory article - Top of the pyramid? Case-based education and case competitions:* How do case-based education and international case competitions contribute to skills development?

2. *Second article - Mapping problem-solving competencies and talent management strategies for universities:* How can the case method be applied in the field of skill mapping and student talent management?
3. *Third article - Application of case method in the Hungarian public education:* What are the potential applications of the case method in Hungarian primary and secondary public education?

The starting point of my research work was the case competitions. The introductory article examines the potential of case-based education and participation in international case competitions from the skills development point of view. Since an important aspect of case competitions is the measurement of skills, I devoted the research behind my second article to the examination of the case method and the area of skill measurement and student talent management. Nowadays, many high school-level case competitions are hold in Hungary, so the research behind the third article of my article-based dissertation examines the question of the applicability of the case method in the field of public education. Figure 2 summarizes the relationship between the individual articles and the research questions.

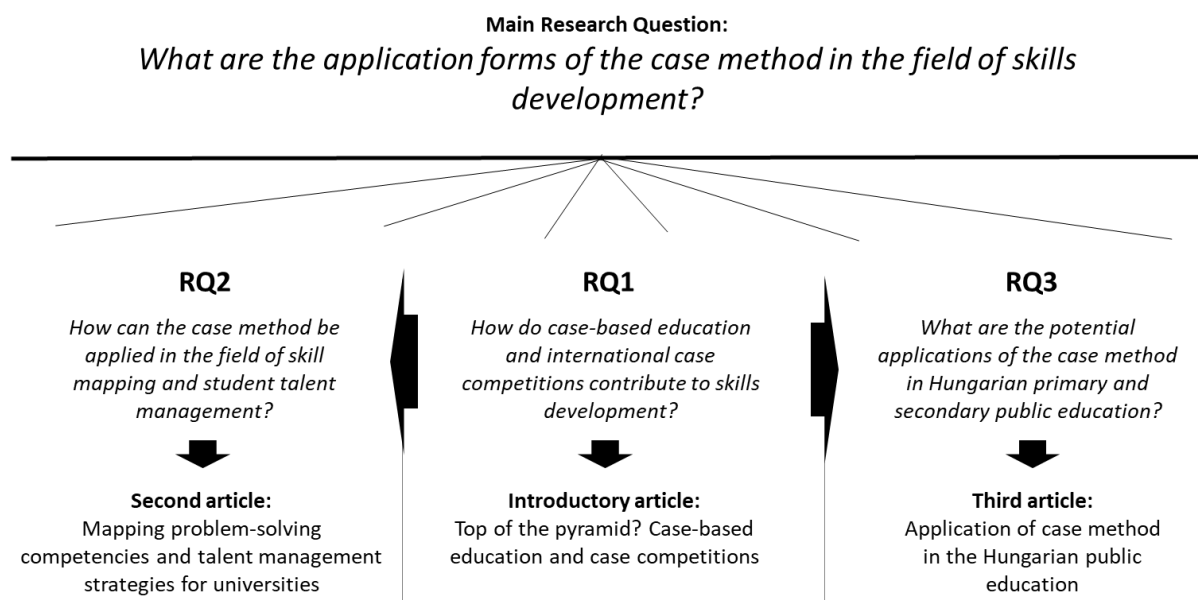


Figure 2: The relationship between the individual articles and the research questions
Source: Author's compilation

In the rest of the chapter, I elaborate on the research questions examined in the publications in detail.

1.3.1. Introductory article: Top of the pyramid? Case-based education and case competitions

In the early '90s, after the regime change Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB) was the first in Hungary to start teaching based on case studies and preparing university students for international case competitions. As part of the Bologna process, two major case competition courses were created at CUB, the Strategic International Management (SIM) course linked to the Institute of Strategy and Management, and the Business Economics Pyramid related to the Institute of Business Economics. The purpose of the article, written together with Erzsébet Czakó and Miklós Kozma, was to provide a comprehensive overview of case-based education and student talent development, as well as participation in international case competitions related to the Business Economics Pyramid.

The research questions examined in connection with the topic can be divided into three groups:

1. What are the characteristics of case-based business education?
2. How was the case-based business education developed at Corvinus University of Budapest's undergraduate programs?
3. What are the main takeaways of undergraduate international case competition participation at Corvinus University of Budapest?

Related to the three above explained research questions, 14 findings were made to provide a comprehensive picture of the case-based teaching method, and to present the form of talent management based on case-based business education, the Business Economics Pyramid. The explicit aim of the article is to establish the basis of further research and educational development with its findings.

During the preparation of the article, we defined the research questions and the related research methodology together with the co-authors. When preparing the article, my primary task was to conduct the literature review and conceptual framework related to the case method, whereas the case method in undergraduate education was the contribution of Erzsébet Czakó, and the experiences of the international case competition are the work of my co-author Miklós Kozma. The propositions related to the research results were formulated together with the co-authors.

1.3.2. Second article: Mapping problem-solving competencies and talent management strategies for universities

With the spread of digitalization and labor market trends, the automation of the recruitment and selection process and the measurement of employees' skills have become increasingly important. The background of the research is a skills assessment software based on the case solution, through which it is possible to measure the problem-solving skills of the users during work. In the frame of the research conducted at the Budapest Business School, we assessed the skills of all first-year students using the software called Spartafy (presented in details in the article). The results of the skills assessment were linked to the students' demographic data.

The research questions examined can be divided into two groups:

1. What clusters can be formed among the first-year students at Budapest Business School based on the results of a case-based skill-assessment?
2. What talent management strategy and action can be assigned to the cluster of students with different problem-solving skills?

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate through a specific example the possibility and importance of measuring problem-solving skills, as well as the potentialities of data-based talent management related to skill measurement.

The research behind the article was a joint project of Case Solvers and Budapest Business School. The research assessed the problem-solving skills through Case Solvers' Spartafy software, which is based on the work of Dániel Szőgyényi and myself. We planned and prepared the demographic questions related to the research together with the co-authors. The sampling related to the research was carried out by Bálint Ecker and Szilárd Németh. We developed and examined the clusters related to the research together with Dániel Szőgyényi, while we jointly proposed talent management strategies related to each cluster.

1.3.3. Third article: Application of case method in the Hungarian public education

With the spread of high school-level case competitions, it became opportune to examine the application of the case method in public education. In 2008, the European Union introduced the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which aims to create a uniform framework for each level of training (Europass, 2023; Derényi and Vámos, 2015). While the introductory and

the second articles of the dissertation examined levels 6 and 7 (undergraduate- and master-levels of higher education) of the EQF, the third article is focusing on levels 1-4 (primary and secondary education).

The research background of the article was provided by the experience related to the high school case competitions organized by Case Solvers (OKPV, CasePénz, Márkaland, Cégre fel!), as well as the new National Core Curriculum introduced in 2020.

Two main research questions were identified:

1. In which subjects taught in primary and secondary education in Hungary can the case method be effectively applied?
2. How can case-based education be introduced into Hungarian primary and secondary education?

The purpose of the research questions is twofold. On the one hand, the research examines the applicability of the method for each subject along a predefined set of criteria, and on the other hand, it proposes the possibility of a partial or full introduction of the transition to case-based education in the case of history, geography, Hungarian literature and the value-based subjects.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

When deciding about the research methodology of my PhD research, I chose the mixed methodology. According to Király et al. (2014), the mixed methodological approach includes research that uses both qualitative and quantitative data to research a topic or question. During the application of the mixed methodology, quantitative and qualitative methods can be used at the same time or at a different time (Hanson et. al., 2005). The application of the mixed methodology was also justified by my active involvement and my different roles in the case method area as described in chapter 1.

Figure 3 summarizes the layers of the methodology applied in my research work.

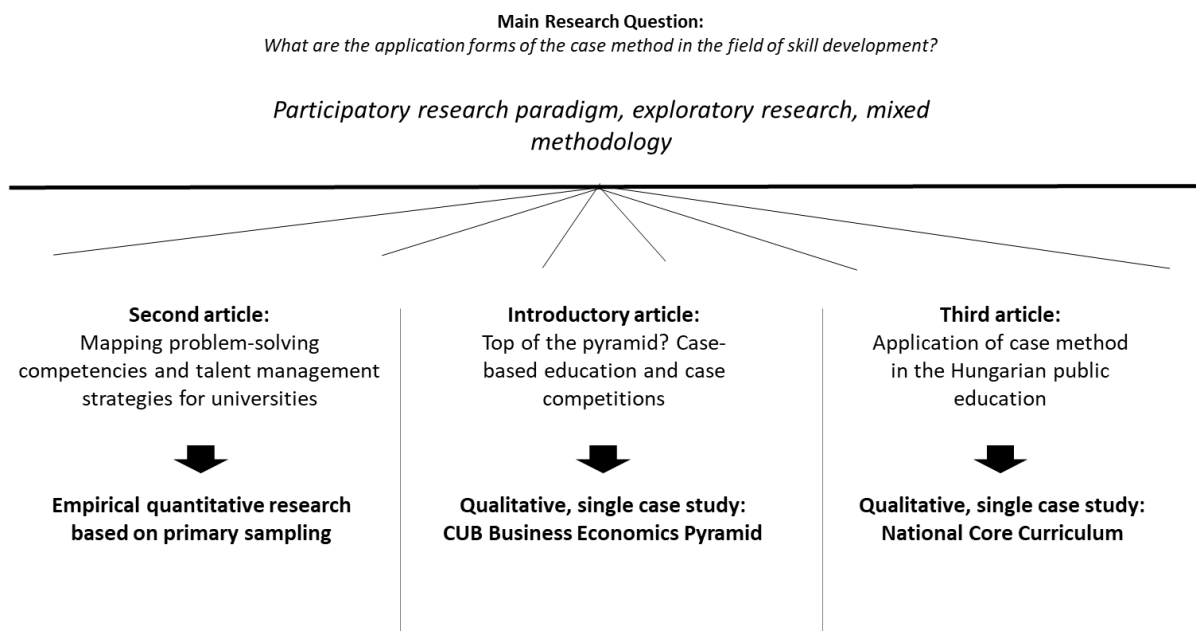


Figure 3: Layers of research methodology
Source: Author's compilation

The introductory article of my dissertation, written together with Erzsébet Czakó and Miklós Kozma, is a qualitative descriptive research based on a single case study design. Relying on the case study of the Business Economics Pyramid by the Institute of Business Economics at Corvinus University of Budapest, we investigated the experiences of education based on case studies and international competitions and aimed to make general conclusions.

The second article of my dissertation, written jointly with Dániel Szőgyényi, Bálint Ecker and Szilárd Németh, is an explanatory research based on my own sample of 546 student respondents. The data collection was carried out in the fall of 2020 among the first-year students of the Budapest Business School. As part of the quantitative primary research, we measured the problem-solving skills of university students and assigned talent management strategies to the clusters formed with the method cluster analysis.

The third publication of my article-based dissertation, written together with Domokos Erőss on the application possibilities of the case method in the field of public education, is also a qualitative, descriptive research based on the single case study method. In this article we studied the National Core Curriculum, which was amended in 2020, and we explored the potentialities of primary and secondary education based on the case method. Based on the case of the Hungarian National Core Curriculum and the related evaluation criteria system, we made general findings regarding the applicability and introduction of the case method in case of different school subjects.

3. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS

My doctoral dissertation and the related research significantly contribute to the higher education, scientific community, students and employees, as well as employers regarding the relationship between skills development and the case method. The article-based doctoral dissertation, examined the application of the case method in the field of skills development. The main question of the research sought to answer “*What are the application forms of the case method in the field of skills development?*”.

The introductory article of my article-based dissertation written jointly with Erzsébet Czákó and Miklós Kozma, "*Top of the pyramid? Case-based education and case competitions*" seeks to answer the question, "*How do case-based education and international case competitions contribute to skills development?*" The key question of the second article, entitled "*Mapping problem-solving competence and talent management strategies for universities*", is "*How can the case method be applied in the field of skill mapping and student talent management?*" The third article of my dissertation, which is entitled "*Application of case method in the Hungarian public education*", revolved around the question "*What are the potential applications of the case method in Hungarian primary and secondary public education?*"

3.1. Conclusion of research

The article-based dissertation and the research behind has the following nine key findings:

Finding #1: Historical development and evolution of case method

The case method stands on the solid philosophical foundations of the American pragmatism. Until now, the case method had six phases (Ábrahám, 2023) - (1.) philosophical foundations, (2.) birth of a teaching method, (3.) early years of Harvard Business School, (4.) expansion of the case method, (5.) the new era of business schools and (6) outside the classroom. - of development.

Finding #2: Nowadays a case ecosystem has developed

Today there is a case ecosystem that is an educational ecosystem with its own stakeholders, learning community and interactions and interdependencies between the actors.

Finding #3: Case method map to illustrate the main application forms of case method

The case method has four main application forms based on the learning environment and outcomes. Case discussions are the traditional classroom based format of case processing, while case assignments are normally linked to the presentation format. Extracurricular case discussions are the non-classroom formats of case solving, while case competitions are case presentation-based contests where students are competing with each other.

Finding #4: Case instructors, talents and the companies are the drivers in case-based business education

The introduction of case-based education at Corvinus University of Budapest was driven by those lecturers, who met with the case method outside Hungary (Ábrahám, Czakó and Kozma, 2021). They built case-based education in the form of case-based courses Dooley and Skinner, 1977. Talents who were willing to take extra efforts were pulling the system together with the companies who started to recruit the top performer students.

Finding #5: The case competitions are becoming more complex and aiming to simulate real business problems

The case studies of the Business Economics Pyramid and the Central European Case Competition show that the complexity of case competitions is increasing as there are more multiformat competitions, which are dealing with live cases. Teams should adapt to these trends, thus they need more flexibility in terms of background knowledge and case-solving skills.

Finding #6: Students can acquire new knowledge and can develop their problem-solving skills through case solving

Case solver students can acquire new problem-, functional area-, company-, industry- and country- specific knowledge through a case study. They can develop 21 skills during case solving. These skills can be organized in four categories: problem solving (*create*), project management (*conduct*), collaboration (*collaborate*) and communication (*communicate*) (Ábrahám, 2019; Ábrahám et al. 2023).

Finding #7: The case-based assessment identified four different talent management for universities

Four different talent management can be outlined based on the type of incentives and direction of upskilling. Extracurricular rewards are upskilling talents and give positive incentives to them. Tutoring and catching up is also a positive incentive to fill the skill gap. Perform-or-punish and up-or-out systems are mainly dealing with negative incentives for the students.

Finding #8: Class and subject based criteria system can evaluate the applicability of the case method

There is an evaluation system which can assess the applicability of case method in primary and secondary public education. The framework has seven evaluation criteria (Problem-based, Complexity, Information; Decision-based, Difficulty, Size, Objectivity) which can be organized into class and subject categories (Ábrahám and Erőss, 2022).

Finding #9: History, geography and the value-based subjects fit the best to the case method in primary and secondary public education.

Based on the defined evaluation framework, history, geography and value-based subjects got the highest scores (29-29-29 scores), while mathematics and science the lowest (22 and 24 scores) (Ábrahám and Erőss, 2022).

Figure 4 illustrates the summary and conclusions of the research through the nine key findings.

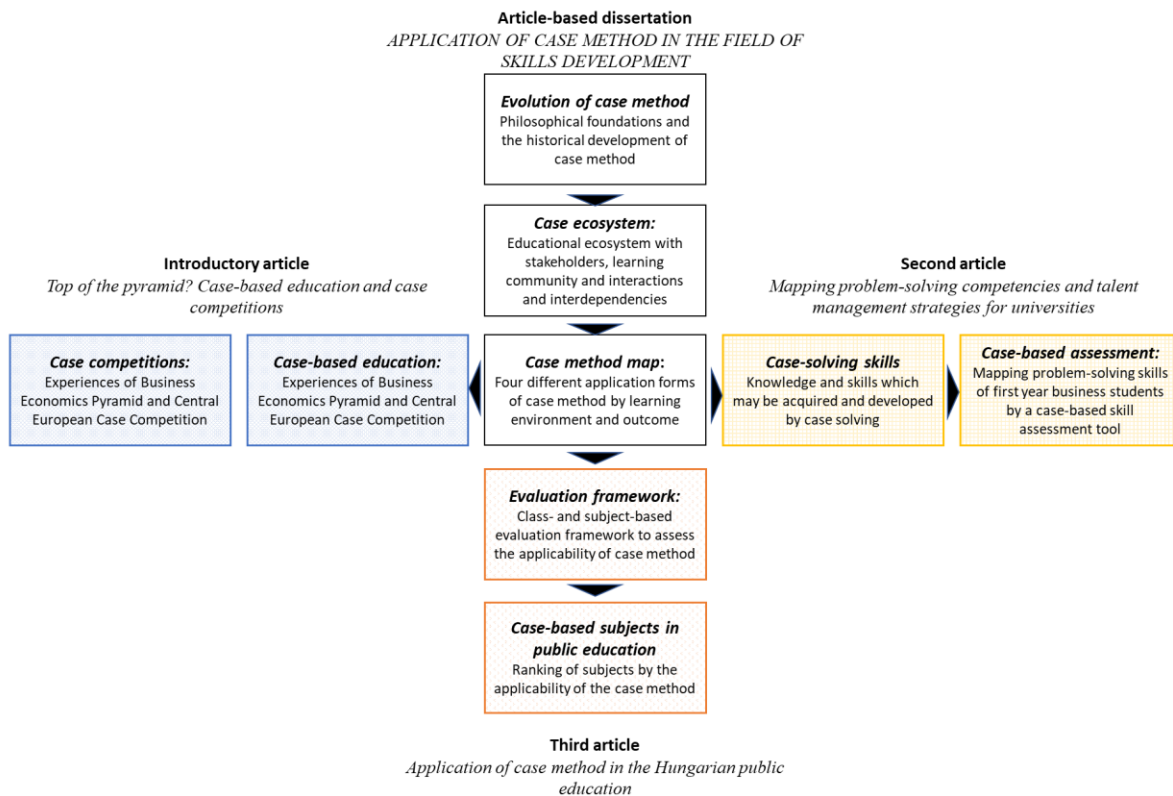


Figure 4: Summary and conclusion of the research

Source: Author's compilation

3.2. Scientific contribution

My PhD research's scientific contributions has two layers (see Figure 16.). First, the research and the article-based dissertation in general provides a general framework (definitions, form of application, skills to develop through case method) for understanding the relationship between skills development and business education. The dissertation provided a historical overview (6 phases of development) of the case method and introduced the concept of the case ecosystem. As a second dimension it presented the current state of the European Competency and Qualification Frameworks and linked it with the case solving skills.

The second layer of the dissertation's scientific contribution are made by the articles behind this paper-based dissertation. Each article had its own research questions and research methodology. The questions and methodology behind the papers were carefully designed and selected to provide a comprehensive investigation of the main, pre-defined research question.

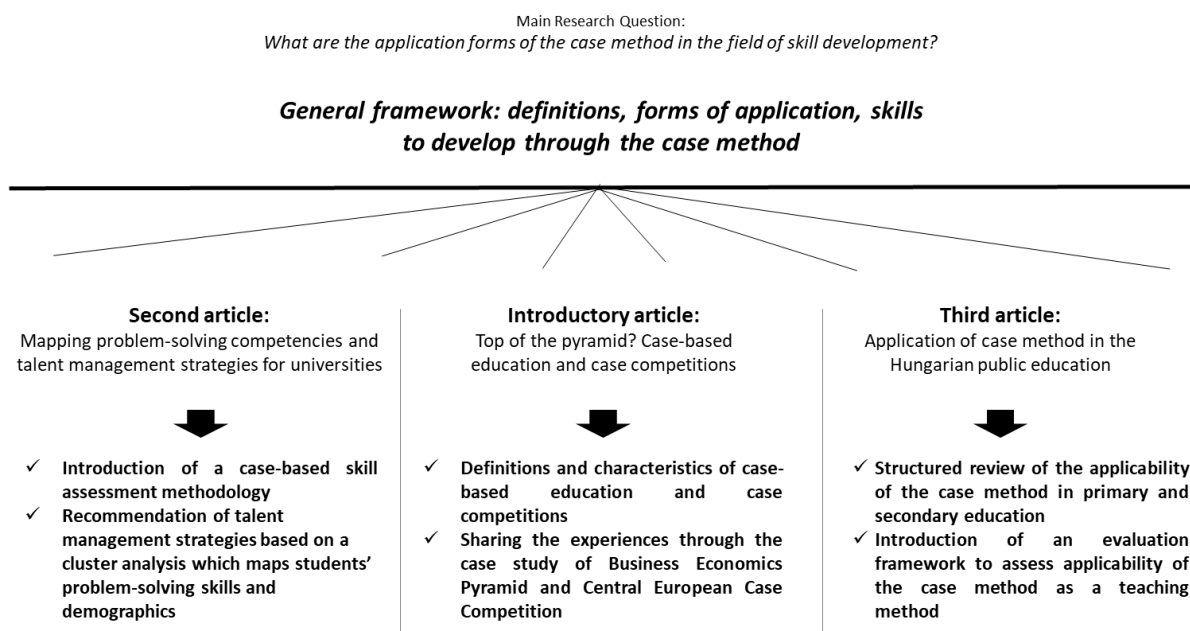


Figure 17: Contribution to scientific community
Source: Author's compilation

The introductory article contributes to the scientific community in two ways. First, the presented general definition and theoretical framework adequately introduces and organizes the most important concepts related to the case method, and on the other hand, it summarizes the experiences related to international case competitions through the case study of the Business Economics Pyramid. It gives a summary about domestic and international best practices for talent management specialists, educators and case competition advisors.

The second article was using a case-based online simulation to map and assess the problem-solving skills of first year students at the Budapest Business School. The article has significant contributions in three main areas. First, the online case-based skill assessment is a novel tool in both the scientific and teaching community. Secondly, the talent clusters that were created based on the measure problem-solving skills and the students' demographic characteristics, can be the bases of further research in this field. Lastly, the identified talent management strategies can contribute to the development of business education in the direction of quality and personalized development of the curriculum.

The third article of the dissertation has significant value for the scientific community by investigating the relationship between public education and skills development, as well as for teachers working in primary and secondary education. On the one hand, it proposes the application possibilities of the case study method along the subjects included in the National

Core Curriculum, and on the other hand, it makes recommendations to policy makers for the partial and full introduction of the case method as a secondary school teaching method.

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5. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

5.1. Publication in a refereed journal

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