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Temporal Self-Management in Higher Education: Goal Time Horizons, SMART-Aligned Goal Setting, and Agile Self-Management

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Abstract

This study examines goal time horizon orientation as a temporal dimension of student self-management in higher education. Using survey data from 3,485 Hungarian university students, it analyses how short-, medium-, and long-term goal horizons combine into distinct profiles, and how these horizons and profiles relate to self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting, agile self-management, and demographic and academic variables. Results show that multi-horizon goal planning is widespread: 81.6% of students combine at least two time horizons, and 43.7% display a complex profile. Multinomial logistic regression indicates that agile self-management has the most consistent association with profile complexity, mainly through the greater likelihood of less complex profiles among non-agile students. The SMART-aligned goal-setting profile shows more specific associations, especially with long-term goal orientation and the absence of a specified goal time horizon. The findings identify a differentiated temporal structure of student self-management with potential relevance for student transition, academic adaptation, and student success.

***Keywords**:* Temporal self-management; goal time horizons; goal time horizon profiles; SMART-aligned goal setting; agile self-management; higher education

Introduction

Higher education students must manage goals relating to different timeframes simultaneously throughout their studies. In addition to daily and weekly tasks, they must adapt to the institutional timetable of semesters, academic years and study programmes, whilst also developing longer-term professional, career and life goals. The conditions for reconciling these goals may vary from one student group to another. For typically younger full-time students, these goals may include academic goals, gaining work experience and the development of their professional identity (Arnett, 2000; Szemerszki, 2023), whilst for older students or those on part-time programmes, workplace and family commitments may also shape the temporal structure of their goals (Chen, 2017; McCune et al., 2010; Szemerszki, 2023).

In this context, goal time horizon orientation can be understood as a temporal dimension of individual self-management related to the processes of goal-setting, time management, and self-regulation. Effective time management is not merely a technical organisational skill, but a process of self-regulation (Patzak et al., 2025). However, the time horizon of goals is not limited to short-term deadlines and operational cycles. Longer-term visions and a connection to one's future self have been proposed to support future-oriented thinking and goal pursuit (Mertens et al., 2022), while proximal goals and self-regulatory processes can help sustain long-term goal pursuit (Bateman & Barry, 2012).

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However, comparatively little is known about the combinations in which higher education students set short-, medium-, and long-term goals, or which self-management and background characteristics are associated with each goal time horizon and their integration. This study uses the concept of *goal time horizon orientation* to capture the time horizons within which students set their goals. The *goal time horizon profile*, formed from a combination of short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons, describes the patterns in which these time horizons co-occur, whilst *goal time horizon profile complexity* denotes the number of time horizons combined within a profile. The study interprets goal time horizon orientation and the integration of different goal time horizons as exploratory temporal dimensions of student self-management, referred to collectively as *temporal self-management*. A profile linking multiple time horizons cannot be regarded in itself as an indicator of effectiveness or competence, but it does provide an opportunity for the empirical examination of the temporal structure of students' goal-setting.

The research examines which goal time horizons and goal time horizon profiles characterise Hungarian higher education students, and how these relate to self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting, agile self-management, years in higher education, and other demographic and academic background variables. Student transition, academic adaptation, and student success are not examined as outcomes, but rather as potential areas of relevance for the identified goal time horizon structures.

Accordingly, the analysis proceeds at two levels: first, the short-, medium-, and long-term goal horizons are examined separately; second, their co-occurrence is examined through goal time horizon profiles and goal time horizon profile complexity. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What short-, medium-, and long-term goal time horizons, and what goal time horizon profiles, characterise Hungarian higher education students?
RQ2. How are the self-reported SMART-aligned goal-setting profile, the agile self-management profile, and demographic and academic background variables related to the individual goal time horizons and goal time horizon profile complexity?

Conceptual Background

Goal Time Horizon and Student Self-Management

Goals are temporal organising principles that structure an individual's relationship to the future, their decisions, and their task management (Bateman & Barry, 2012; Locke & Latham, 2006). According to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2006), goals refer to future valued outcomes, while specific, challenging goals can enhance performance by directing attention and effort towards goal-relevant action. The types of future directions individuals consider may vary with age and life-course position (Arnett, 2000). For typically younger full-time students, shorter-term academic goals may coexist with longer-term personal and career goals (Arnett, 2000), while older and part-time students' goal-setting may be more closely linked to work, family and career-related purposes (Chen, 2017; Lee, 2025; Szemerszki, 2023).

The institutional temporal structure of higher education studies (programme duration, semesters, academic years, and a system of deadlines) can shape students' temporal experiences and understandings of university time (Brooks et al., 2021). Proximal goals can facilitate progress monitoring and self-regulation (Schunk, 1990), whereas longer-term reflection can provide direction for future identity and career planning (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Medium-term goals can be conceptualised as an intermediate planning horizon between these proximal and distal orientations. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that students may need to reconcile institutionally structured academic time with longer-term personal and career goals (Bateman & Barry, 2012; Brooks et al., 2021).

Related Self-Management Characteristics: SMART-Aligned Goal Setting and Agile Self-Management

In the present study, self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting and agile self-management are treated as conceptually distinct self-management characteristics that may be associated with students' goal time horizons and goal time horizon profile complexity. They are not conceptualised as components of temporal self-management or as dimensions of a single overarching construct.

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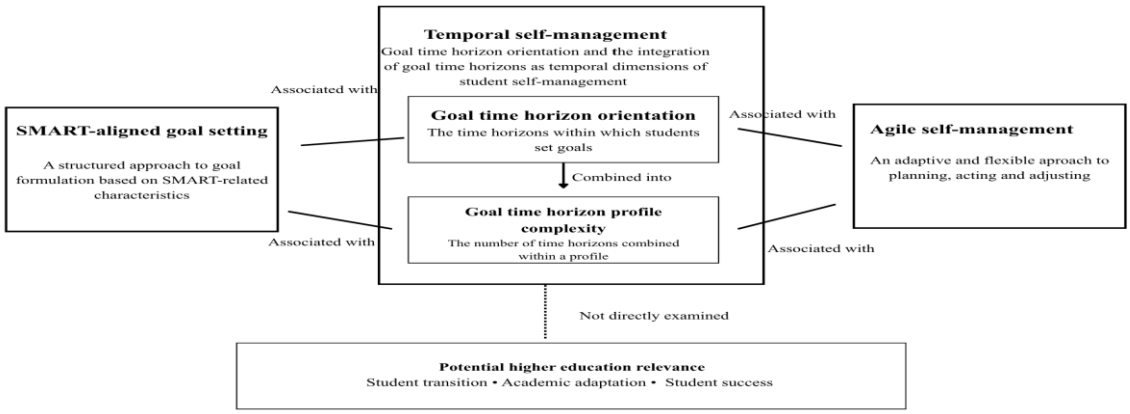
The SMART model is a practical framework for structured goal setting. According to one common interpretation, SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (Poe et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2024), although the terminology and application of SMART criteria may vary across contexts (Bjerke & Renger, 2017). From this study's perspective, the time-bound element is particularly important, as it links goal content to a defined temporal frame. Taken together, research on SMART-based reflective planning tasks and the life crafting approach suggests that written goal-setting, temporal structuring, and regular reflection on goals may support self-reflection, engagement in learning, future-oriented thinking, and well-being (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019; Woods et al., 2024). However, SMART goals may not offer a performance advantage over less specific or open goals in creative tasks (Pietsch et al., 2024).

In this study, agile self-management refers to a self-management practice based on short planning cycles, reflective review, prioritisation, and task decomposition. The agile approach originated in software development, but its core principles of iteration, inspection, adaptation, and incremental progress (Krehbiel et al., 2017; Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017) can be interpreted as aligning with the cyclical logic of self-regulated learning. According to Schunk's (1990) model, learners observe and evaluate their performance, then modify their behaviour accordingly. In agile self-management, the individual breaks down larger goals into smaller subtasks, tracks their progress, and then replans their next steps based on their experiences. In a higher education context, this iterative logic can be linked to self-directed improvement and engagement (Krehbiel et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2024).

Figure 1 summarises the conceptual framework adopted in this study. It positions goal time horizon orientation and goal time horizon profile complexity as focal dimensions of temporal self-management, while treating SMART-aligned goal setting and agile self-management as related but conceptually distinct self-management characteristics.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Temporal Self-Management and Related Constructs in Higher Education



Note. Solid lines indicate examined associations, the arrow indicates profile construction, and the dotted line indicates potential relevance not directly examined. The model does not imply causal relationships.

Research Gap and Hypotheses

The present study treats goal time horizon orientation and goal time horizon profile complexity as focal dimensions of temporal self-management. Within this framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. The majority of students combine at least two time horizons, i.e., exhibit multi-horizon goal planning.
H2. Agile self-management is positively associated with a more complex goal time horizon profile.

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H3. The self-reported SMART-aligned goal-setting profile is associated with goal time horizon orientation and goal time horizon profile complexity.
H4. Students with fewer years in higher education are more likely to exhibit less complex goal time horizon profiles than students with five or more years in higher education.

Analytically, H1 was evaluated descriptively by examining the proportion of students who combined at least two goal time horizons. H2 and H4 were evaluated primarily through the multinomial logistic regression analysis of goal time horizon profile complexity. H3 was evaluated at both analytical levels, using the binary logistic regression models for the individual goal time horizons and the multinomial model for profile complexity.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

A total of 3,485 students participated in the study. The sample included 33.9% male and 66.1% female students; 35.0% were aged 21 or below, 12.6% were 22–24, 8.5% were 25–29, and 44.0% were 30 years or older. Most participants were enrolled in Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science (BA/BSc) programmes (62.6%), followed by undivided programmes[1] (12.6%), short-cycle programmes[2] (11.7%), Master of Arts (MA) programmes (10.7%), and doctoral (PhD) programmes (2.4%). The sample was almost evenly divided between full-time (49.2%) and part-time students (50.8%); 34.1% were first-year students, 38.7% had studied for 2–4 years, and 27.2% for 5 or more years. Regarding employment, 30.6% were not working, 23.1% worked part-time, and 46.3% full-time. The online questionnaire, containing 1 open-ended and 18 closed-ended questions, was available from September 8, 2025, to November 14, 2025. The selection criterion was that the respondent be enrolled at a university operating in Hungary (see Appendix D, Table D1).

Questionnaire Development and Content Validation

The questionnaire included demographic and academic background variables and thematic blocks on self-awareness, goals, personal effectiveness, goal time horizon orientation, agile self-management, and use of artificial intelligence. The present study uses only those parts of the survey that relate to goal time horizon orientation, SMART-aligned goal-setting operationalisation, agile self-management, and demographic and academic background variables.

The questionnaire measured self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting using six items, the level of agile self-management using a seven-item, four-point Likert scale, and goal time horizon orientation using a multiple-response question in which students could indicate the time horizons for which they typically set goals. The questionnaire's content validation was conducted in a multi-step process. In the first stage, experts from various fields (law, sociology, media studies, cybersecurity, and education) helped refine the questions and items. Subsequently, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with students in two rounds, followed by a final testing phase involving 17 participants.

[1] In Hungary, integrated, undivided degree programmes lead directly to a master's degree without an intermediate bachelor's degree. Their duration is equivalent to the combined duration of consecutive bachelor's and master's degree programmes.
[2] In this study, the term 'short-cycle programmes' serves as an umbrella term encompassing two types of programmes within the Hungarian higher education system. Higher education vocational training typically lasts two years and provides a higher education vocational qualification but does not confer an academic degree. Postgraduate specialist training is a higher education programme lasting 2–4 semesters that builds on a bachelor's or master's degree and provides an additional specialist qualification but does not lead to a further bachelor's or master's degree.

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Measures

Goal Time Horizon Indicators and Horizon Profile.

In preparation for the analysis of the goal time horizon, three aggregated binary variables were created from the original response categories. The short-term goal time horizon indicates whether the respondent selected daily or 1–4-week goals. The medium-term goal time horizon encompasses goals falling within a semester/academic-year or 1–5-year time horizon, while the long-term goal time horizon covers those with a time horizon longer than five years. The 1–5-year horizon was treated as medium-term because, in higher education, this period often corresponds to programme completion, transition to employment, or early career preparation, whereas goals beyond five years were interpreted as extended long-term orientation. A goal time horizon profile was constructed from the combination of these three binary variables. The profile distinguished four ordinal categories: (a) No specified goal time horizon; (b) One goal time horizon; (c) Two goal time horizons; (d) Complex goal time horizon profile, i.e., goals were specified for all three time horizons (see Appendix C, Tables C1–C4).

Self-Reported SMART-Aligned Goal-Setting Profile.

Self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting was measured using six in-house-developed items. In addition to characteristics corresponding to the classic SMART framework, the operationalisation included alignment with abilities, resources, and personal values. The internal consistency of the six items was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .764). The profile was constructed from the combined pattern of responses to the six items. The *rather yes* and *completely true* categories were treated as positive responses. Students who responded negatively to at least one of the six items were classified as having a non-SMART-aligned goal-setting profile. Those who gave positive responses in all six items but selected the completely true category in no more than three items were classified as having a SMART-aligned goal-setting profile. A strongly SMART-aligned goal-setting profile was assigned to students who gave positive responses in all six items and selected completely true for at least four items. Based on these criteria, 57.3% of the students were classified as non-SMART-aligned, 25.8% as SMART-aligned, and 16.9% as strongly SMART-aligned (see Appendix A, Tables A1–A3).

Agile Self-Management.

Agile self-management was measured using seven four-point Likert-scale items covering analytical decision-making, prioritisation, task decomposition, reflective review, written task tracking, short-cycle planning, and managing distractions. The internal consistency of the seven items was adequate for exploratory analysis (Cronbach's α = .683). Responses to the seven Likert items were recoded so that the composite score would reflect not only the difference between rejection and acceptance but also the intensity of the practice. *Not at all* and *rather not* responses received 0 points, rather yes responses received 1 point, and completely true responses received 2 points. The resulting composite indicator thus ranged from 0 to 14 points. Based on the total score, three theoretically defined categories were distinguished: non-agile profile (0–4 points), partially agile profile (5–9 points), and highly agile profile (10–14 points). Regarding agile self-management, 40.9% of respondents exhibited a non-agile profile, 50.3% a partially agile profile, and 8.8% a highly agile profile (see Appendix B, Tables B1–B3).

Analytic Procedures

The analysis proceeded at two levels. First, descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of the individual goal time horizon variables, followed by separate binary logistic regression models for the short-, medium-, and long-term horizons and for the absence of a specified goal time horizon. These models examined the associations of the SMART-aligned goal-setting profile, the agile self-management profile, and demographic and academic background variables with each horizon. Second, the complexity of the combined goal time horizon profile was analysed. An ordinal logistic regression model was initially estimated; however, because the proportional odds assumption was violated, multinomial logistic regression was used for the profile-complexity analysis. In the multinomial model, the complex goal time horizon profile served as the reference outcome category. Given the cross-sectional observational design, all regression coefficients are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects (descriptive correlations are reported in Appendix D, Table D2). For ordered predictors, the highest or most advanced category was used as the reference group. For nominal predictors, reference categories were

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selected to provide interpretable comparisons; for field of study, *multiple fields* served as a broader comparison category because it was not restricted to a single disciplinary field.

Ethics

Participation was anonymous and voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the study's purpose and the processing of their data, and only those who accepted the data protection statement were included in the sample. No personally identifiable data were collected, and the data were processed only in an aggregated form. The research permit number was PPKE KMI KE 2024/2.

Results

Distribution of Short-, Medium-, and Long-Term Goal Horizons

At the level of the original response options, 82.8% of respondents indicated a goal horizon longer than five years, and medium-term planning was also strongly represented: 65.9% set 1–5-year goals, and 55.8% set semester/academic year goals. In contrast, short-term goal planning was less common: 41.4% of students set daily goals, and 45.1% set goals for 1–4 weeks. Only 2.4% did not specify any goal time horizon.

Factors Associated with Short-, Medium-, and Long-Term Goal Horizons

Based on the aggregated goal time horizon indicators, 57.0% specified a short-term goal time horizon, 83.1% a medium-term goal time horizon, and 82.8% a long-term goal time horizon, while 2.4% specified no goal time horizon. Four binary logistic regression models were run: separate models for the predictors of short-, medium-, and long-term goal horizons, as well as for the absence of a specified goal time horizon. All models showed a significant improvement in fit over the empty model ($p < .001$), with low to moderate explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .038–.147$). The Hosmer–Lemeshow tests did not indicate any significant fit problems in any of the cases. The statistically significant category-level associations for each outcome are shown in Table 1; full model estimates, including odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for all categories, and predictor-level tests are reported in Appendix E, Tables E1–E4.

Table 1

Factors Associated with Goal Time Horizons Based on Binary Logistic Regression

Predictor	Category	Short OR [95% CI]	Medium OR [95% CI]	Long OR [95% CI]	No specified goal time horizon OR [95% CI]
Gender	Female (reference)				
	Male	0.76 [0.64–0.89]**			
Age group	30+ years (reference)				
	≤21 years				0.30 [0.11–0.81]*
	22–24 years		1.91 [1.26–2.89]**		0.24 [0.08–0.72]*
Level of study	MA/PhD/DLA (reference)				
	Short-cycle	0.67 [0.50–0.89]**		0.60 [0.39–0.94]*	4.44 [1.20–16.50]*
	BA/BSc			0.58 [0.39–0.85]**	

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Predictor	Category	Short OR [95% CI]	Medium OR [95% CI]	Long OR [95% CI]	No specified goal time horizon OR [95% CI]
Mode of study	Part-time (reference)				
	Full-time	1.59 [1.20–2.12]**			
Field of study	Multiple fields (reference)				
	Humanities and arts	0.75 [0.56–0.99]*	0.65 [0.44–0.97]*		
	Education and sports	0.59 [0.43–0.79]***	0.48 [0.32–0.71]***		
	Law and public administration	0.62 [0.45–0.86]**	0.56 [0.36–0.88]*		
	Economics	0.70 [0.51–0.98]*			
	Information technology		0.52 [0.32–0.84]**		3.00 [1.13–7.99]*
	Engineering, agriculture and natural sciences		0.59 [0.39–0.89]*		
	Medicine and health sciences		0.61 [0.39–0.94]*		
	Religious studies		0.53 [0.31–0.89]*		
SMART-aligned goal-setting profile	Strongly SMART-aligned (reference)				
	Non-SMART-aligned			0.40 [0.28–0.56]***	3.54 [1.21–10.39]*
	SMART-aligned		1.39 [1.05–1.86]*	0.59 [0.41–0.86]**	
Years in higher education	5+ years (reference)				
	First-year students	0.63 [0.50–0.80]***	0.59 [0.44–0.79]***		
Agile self-management profile	Highly agile (reference)				
	Non-agile	0.52 [0.40–0.69]***		0.59 [0.39–0.91]*	

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. Each column presents a separate binary logistic regression model predicting the indicated outcome. Only statistically significant category-level associations are shown.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Patterns of association differed across the four outcomes. Full-time students were more likely, whereas students in the non-agile profile were less likely, to indicate daily or 1–4-week goals. Male students, first-year students, students in short-cycle programmes, and several field-of-study groups also showed lower odds of short-term goal setting. Several field-of-study categories were associated with medium-term goals, with students in education and sports showing the largest negative difference from the multiple-field reference group. In addition, students aged 22–24 and students in the SMART-aligned profile were more likely to report a medium-term horizon, while first-year students were less likely to do so. The SMART-aligned goal-setting profile was most clearly associated with long-term goals: compared with strongly SMART-aligned students, both non-SMART-aligned and SMART-aligned students had lower odds of reporting goals beyond five years. Lower odds were also observed among students in short-cycle or BA/BSc programmes and those in the non-agile profile. Higher odds of having no specified goal time horizon were observed among students in short-cycle programmes, the non-SMART-aligned profile, and information technology; younger students (aged 21 or below and aged 22–24) were less likely than those aged 30 or above to lack a specified goal time horizon.

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Goal Time Horizon Profile Complexity and Its Associated Factors

By combining the three aggregated goal time horizon variables, eight patterns were identified. The most frequent pattern was the complex short–medium–long profile (43.7%). A further 27.9% combined medium- and long-term goals, 7.3% combined short- and medium-term goals, and 2.7% combined short- and long-term goals. Overall, 81.6% of students specified at least two time horizons. Single-horizon profiles were less common: 8.6% selected only long-term goals, 4.2% only medium-term goals, and 3.3% only short-term goals, while 2.4% specified no goal time horizon. For the subsequent profile-complexity analysis, these eight patterns were collapsed into four categories: no specified goal time horizon (2.4%), one goal time horizon (16.0%), two goal time horizons (37.8%), and complex goal time horizon profile (43.7%).

Because the ordinal logistic model violated the proportional odds assumption, multinomial logistic regression was used to examine profile complexity. The model showed a significant improvement in fit, $\chi^2(78) = 339.229$, $p < .001$, with Nagelkerke $R^2 = .104$. Likelihood Ratio Tests indicated that the agile self-management profile, SMART-aligned goal-setting profile, years in higher education, level of study, field of study, gender, and mode of study contributed significantly to distinguishing between goal time horizon profiles (full model diagnostics, predictor-level tests, and parameter estimates are reported in Appendix F).

Compared with the complex goal time horizon profile, less complex profiles were most consistently associated with the non-agile profile and fewer years in higher education. The *no specified goal time horizon* category was also more likely among non-agile and non-SMART-aligned students, men, students in short-cycle or BA/BSc programmes, first-year students, and those in education and sports or information technology. Profiles with one goal time horizon were more frequent among non-agile students, men, students with fewer years in higher education, and several field-of-study groups, while full-time students were less likely to belong to this category. Profiles with two goal time horizons were more likely among non-agile students, first-year students, those in short-cycle programmes, and students in humanities and arts, education and sports, or law and public administration.

Discussion

Main Findings: Differentiated Temporal Self-Management

The results present a differentiated picture of how Hungarian university students structure the time horizons of their goals. Multi-horizon goal planning was widespread, supporting Hypothesis H1, while profile complexity was primarily linked to agile self-management, supporting H2. Self-reported SMART-aligned goal setting showed more specific, outcome-dependent associations with medium- and long-term goal time horizons, the absence of a specified goal time horizon, and goal time horizon profile complexity, providing support for H3. H4 received partial support, as first-year students were more likely to belong to less complex profiles than students who had been studying for five or more years.

Multi-Horizon Goal Planning as a Form of Temporal Self-Management

The results suggest that short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons are associated with different self-management logics. The short-term horizon can be interpreted as an operational pattern, the medium-term as an institutional-academic pattern, and the long-term as a strategic goal-structuring pattern. In this sense, a complex goal time horizon profile can serve as an indicator of a more differentiated temporal organisation of goal planning. This interpretation aligns with the cyclical logic of self-regulated learning, in which goal setting, self-monitoring of performance, and behavioural modification are interrelated processes (Schunk, 1990).

Temporal Layers and Goal Time Horizon Profile Complexity

A lower proportion of short-term goals does not necessarily indicate a lack of future orientation. The fact that non-agile students were less likely to set daily or 1–4-week goals is consistent with the theoretical logic of agile self-management. The use of short-term goals can reflect task decomposition, short-cycle planning, progress tracking, and replanning (Krehbiel et al., 2017). The higher likelihood of short-term goal planning among full-time students may indicate an association between more intensive institutional engagement and greater use of short-cycle goal planning. For the medium-term horizon, field of study was a

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significant differentiating factor, suggesting that this horizon may be partly linked to programme-specific temporal structures. The higher likelihood among students aged 22–24 may indicate a life-stage pattern in which academic, professional, and early career orientations become particularly salient (Arnett, 2000). This interpretation is consistent with the *student timescapes* approach, which emphasises the role of institutional temporal structures in shaping students' experiences and understandings of university time (Brooks et al., 2021).

In the long-term time horizon, the SMART-aligned goal-setting profile and the level of study showed clear associations. Differences relative to MA/PhD/DLA students suggest that longer-term goal planning may be more salient among those who are already on a more advanced or specialised academic track.

Based on the multinomial model of goal time horizon profiles, the role of agile self-management primarily suggests that greater goal time horizon profile complexity appears to be associated less with high agility per se than with not belonging to the non-agile self-management profile. This finding is consistent with the interpretation that agility does not simply mean rapid response, but rather the capacity for cyclical learning and self-correction. In agile learning approaches, short iterations, feedback, and reprioritisation support continuous adaptation (Krehbiel et al., 2017; Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017), which, in a higher education context, can be linked to cyclical models of self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2017).

Years in higher education and level of study showed related but distinct associations with goal time horizon profile complexity. Compared with students who had spent five or more years in higher education, first-year students were more likely to belong to less complex profiles. Students enrolled in short-cycle programmes also showed higher odds of some less complex profiles relative to MA/PhD/DLA students. These cross-sectional differences are consistent with the possibility that experience within higher education and programme structure are related to students' temporal patterns of goal planning, but they do not establish developmental change over time. Although the literature suggests that life-situation factors such as employment and age may be relevant to students' learning contexts and educational experiences (Chen, 2017), their role emerged in a nuanced manner in the present analysis. Employment did not show an independent significant relationship, whereas age was a significant predictor in certain time horizon categories. Students aged 22–24 were more likely than those aged 30 or above to specify a medium-term time horizon, while both students aged 21 or below and those aged 22–24 were less likely to have no specified goal time horizon. This suggests that age does not appear as a general profile-complexity factor, but rather as a life-stage pattern associated with specific time horizons.

The Specific Role of the SMART-Aligned Goal-Setting Profile

The self-reported SMART-aligned goal-setting profile played a more specific role. It showed particularly clear associations with the long-term goal time horizon and with the likelihood of having no specified goal time horizon. This finding extends the discussion of the SMART model beyond its common use as an operational goal-setting framework (Bjerke & Renger, 2017). In higher education applications, SMART-based goal-setting has been linked to recurring reflection and planning cycles, self-directed improvement, and processes relevant to academic self-regulation (Poe et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2024). At the same time, the SMART-aligned goal-setting profile was not associated with goal time horizon profile complexity as consistently as agile self-management. This may reflect the fact that structured goal formulation and integration of multiple time horizons represent related but distinct aspects of self-management. The higher odds of a medium-term time horizon among students in the SMART-aligned profile relative to the strongly SMART-aligned reference group suggest a non-monotonic pattern, which may indicate that the intermediate SMART-aligned profile is particularly associated with the semester, academic-year, and 1–5-year time horizons of higher education.

Educational Implications

The temporal structure of goal planning may have practical relevance for learning support. In addition to motivation and general time management, helping students connect short-term tasks, institutional cycles, and longer-term professional goals may represent a useful component of self-management support in higher education. Support for goal time horizon integration may be particularly relevant for first-year students, who were more likely to belong to less complex goal time horizon profiles. Previous research on first-year students has identified time management, workload, and others' expectations among the common difficulties faced by first-year students (Brooker et al., 2017). Similar support may be relevant for short-cycle

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programmes, as well as for students aged 30 or above, who had higher odds of lacking a specified goal time horizon than students aged 21 or below and those aged 22–24. This may indicate the value of explicitly linking academic goals with current work and life circumstances and with medium- to long-term career plans (Chen, 2017). These implications should be regarded as possible applications of the present findings rather than as demonstrated effects on transition or student success.

Limitations

Because the sample was voluntary and convenience-sampled, it is not representative of the entire Hungarian higher education student population. Compared with national higher education statistics for 2024/2025, women (66.1% vs. 55.0%) and part-time students (50.8% vs. 32.6%) were overrepresented in the present sample (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2024). These differences should be considered when generalising the findings to the Hungarian student population. Additionally, the voluntary nature of the response may have resulted in a self-selection bias. Another limitation is that the study relied on self-report measures. Students evaluated their own goal-setting and self-management practices, which may have resulted in variations stemming from social expectations and differences in self-interpretation. Due to the cross-sectional research design, the associations cannot be interpreted as causal relationships. The SMART-aligned goal-setting and agile self-management profiles were measured and categorised using self-developed, theoretically defined exploratory indicators; therefore, further validation of both the items and profile thresholds is warranted. The SMART-aligned goal-setting items were assessed at a general level rather than separately for short-, medium-, and long-term goals; consequently, the analysis cannot determine whether self-reported SMART alignment varies across goal time horizons. Additionally, the goal time horizon variable indicates the time frames within which students set goals, but it does not measure the quality, specificity, or achievement of these goals. Future research should further validate the SMART-aligned goal-setting and agile self-management indicators, examine the stability of goal time horizon profiles in longitudinal designs, and investigate how these profiles relate to student success outcomes such as academic progress, retention, well-being, or persistence.

Conclusion

The findings show that multi-horizon goal planning was widespread among the surveyed Hungarian higher education students, but short-, medium-, and long-term horizons showed different patterns of association with the examined self-management and background characteristics. The complexity of goal time horizon profiles was most consistently associated with agile self-management, especially through the greater likelihood of less complex profiles among non-agile students. The role of the self-reported SMART-aligned goal-setting profile was more specific. It was most clearly associated with the long-term goal time horizon and with differences in the likelihood of having no specified goal time horizon, while a more limited association also appeared for medium-term goals.

In higher education practice, the findings suggest potential value in support that helps students connect daily or weekly tasks, semester requirements, 1–5-year goals, and longer-term career or life goals. Whether such temporal goal structures contribute to transition, academic adaptation, or student success cannot be determined from the present study and should be examined directly in future research. The main contribution of this study is to identify the integration of short-, medium-, and long-term goals as a temporal dimension of student self-management that can be empirically examined and incorporated into future research on student success.

Declarations

The author declares no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. No external funding was received for this study. The author used AI-assisted tools, including DeepL, Grammarly, and generative AI systems, for translation support, language refinement, stylistic editing, terminology harmonisation, and consistency checking during manuscript preparation. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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