

The Debt Crisis and Higher Education Reforms in Greece: A Catalyst for Change [1]

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In this article, the aim is to analyse the recent debt crisis as a catalyst for the implementation of long anticipated changes in Greece. A good example of this is the recent reforms in higher education.

The Greek debt crisis has been a major topic in the news for the past two years. Since the introduction of the austerity measures by the IMF and the Troika, the media discussion about Greece have focused on the frequent incidents of social unrest, the prediction of the exact day of bankruptcy, and all the evils of government budget deficits of P.I.G.S. [2]

Despite the gloomy predictions for the future of the Greek economy, the debt crisis has acted as a catalyst for the acceleration of notable changes in Greek society, which allows a great degree of optimism for the future. A major example of this is the recent reforms in the Greek higher education system.

The new Framework Act for higher education was the first, in the history of modern Greece, to gain support from the two major political parties, the socialists of PASOK and the conservatives of New Democracy. It is indicative that Anna Diamantopoulou, the Minister of Education, has mentioned in her twitter account on the day that the education bill passed, "history has been written today. For first time, ¾ of the Greek Parliament voted in favour of the Framework Act for higher education" (Diamantopoulou, 2011)

For someone to understand why this is considered as a historic event, one should take into account, that it was only days before the voting of the Framework Act that the report by OECD [3], about the education in Greece, described the Greek higher education system as an 'out-dated, centrally planned system' (OECD, 2011). Moreover, the same report underlined as the one of the major problems in Greek higher education the limited capacity of the Greek government to steer the system. So, the introduction and the support of the Framework Act by the majority of the parliament marked, indeed, a historical moment. The problems in the Greek higher education have been reported in several publications. An explicit description of the state of the Greek higher education system is mentioned in the report by the International Committee published in 2010 [4] which states that:

Greece's system of Higher Education suffers from a crisis of values as well as out-dated policies and organizational structures. The tragedy is that leaders, scholars, students and political parties that aim to promote the public good have been trapped in a system that subverts the goals they seek, corrupts the ideals they pursue and forsakes the public they serve (International Committee, 2010, p.7).

OECD (2011) outlined that for many years Greece had been refusing to fully comply with the EU directives and the Bologna process despite the pressures by the EU. Similarly it was only in 2004 that Greece created the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency (HQAA) and introduced basic mechanisms of quality assurance and accountability in higher education institutions (Papadimitriou, 2011). Even after the establishment of HQAA, the Greek higher education institutions were reluctant to adopt basic quality assurance mechanisms (Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency, 2009).

The lack of accountability in the Greek higher education has been discussed in previous research (Asderaki, 2009) and has been underlined by external bodies as a source of the long-standing problems in the Greek higher education system (International Committee, 2010).

The lack of accountability has been coupled with an increased intervention in the planning and funding of higher education within a context of political opportunism. One example of this is the centrally planned number of available places in Greek higher education institutions. The number of available places in higher education had been used by both the major political parties as a means to attract voters (Psacharopoulos, 2003).

All the above have contributed to the degradation of the reputation of Greek higher education institutions, and have been the source of many problems relating to the economy and the society (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). For example Greek higher education graduates have high unemployment rates and the lower net return in EU (OECD, 2011). Also, Greece has been a prime exporter of students to other countries, which in addition to the negative effect on the balance of payments, has contributed dramatically and accelerated the 'brain-drain' phenomenon in Greece, that



has affected the country for at least the last 100 years (Psacharopoulos & Tassoulas, 2004).

Within this problematic context the new Framework Act was introduced, and included radical reforms. The Framework Act [5], introduced by the Minister Anna Diamantopoulou, included a wide range of reforms which targeted the problematic areas where changes have been proposed by external bodies, such as the International Committee, the HQAA and the OECD.

One of the major reforms was the change in the electoral system of Rectors. Under the new system the Rectors are appointed by a governing board following an internationally published call for applications. The aim is to tackle a long-lasting problem in Greek higher education which is the active involvement of political parties, through their youths, in the election of the rector. Until 2011, the election of Rectors has been an issue of internal politics, between the student political parties representatives and the candidates, something which has been heavily criticised as unethical and as a source of corruption (Tzilivakis, 2011).

Another notable reform was the abolition of the academic asylum law. The so-called university asylum, or academic asylum as it is stated in the law, had been a result of the 1973 student uprising. The initial purpose of this was to reassure the free movement of academic ideas within a safe university environment (Papadimitriou, 2011). For many years, this part of the law had been violated by extremists who used university grounds to avoid arrest, before, after or during violent demonstrations.

It is indicative what Kyriazis and Asderaki (2008, p.42) mention "this [the academic asylum] has been in several occasions encroached resulting damages to the universities' properties and other unlawful actions". This has been a subject of wider public debate and the feeling of the Greek society was that this was a clearly outdated and abused part of the law (Grove, 2011). Political parties have been reluctant to change this part of the law as any previous attempt for reform was characterised, primarily by the left parties, as an effort to de-democratise higher education.

The two examples mentioned above are only a fraction of the bold reforms included in the new Framework Act.

For years the political parties in power have been reluctant to implement any substantial changes to the Greek higher education system, fearing the political cost and the reaction of the different stakeholders who have been fiercely reacting to any change or reform. Saitis (1988) argues that the Greek political system, and specifically the two major political parties, have shown political opportunism which has delayed reforms and most importantly the proper application of existing laws. There are several examples of former Ministers of Education in Greece who found themselves out of office as a result of the huge demonstrations and reactions following an effort to reform parts of the system. Also it is indicative what Nakos and Hajidimitriou (2009, p. 71 cited in Papadimitriou 2011, p.122) state about the influence of political system in generating reforms in Greek HE "it is very common for both political parties to oppose reforms only because the other party proposed them".

The recent Framework Act marks a significant departure from the previous 'status quo'. This happened as a direct result of the determination shown by the Greek Ministry of Education, the support by the opposition, and the wider Greek public. This change of heart can be regarded as one of the consequences of the debt crisis. After the outbreak of the debt crisis the Greek society has entered a period of shocking and painful transformation. This transformation is related to the fundamentals of society, for example; the change from what used to be a state-funded economy dominated by political partisanism, to a meritocratic society, in which personal accomplishments and social values regain their real significance. Much has been said about the 'internal devaluation' which is attempted by the policies and measures imposed by IMF within a monetarist remedy for the problems of the economy.

One may notice another devaluation, which concerns the oversized and irrational expectations of the Greek society about employment, wealth, and the lack of individual responsibility towards society.

For years, the raw model in the Greek society has been someone who has managed to secure a job in the public sector using the social networks of friends, relatives and politicians, and much less on his/her own merits. This raw model had been based on a 'less (effort) for more (returns)' philosophy, regarding the contribution one should have to society and the economy. This devaluation of the prior distorted social model has acted as a catalyst for the acceleration of long-anticipated reforms. A prime example was the recent reforms in Greek higher education.

Contrary to the expectations the introduction of the reforms have been received positively by the general public and most importantly by the students. There were not any major demonstrations following the abolition of the academic asylum as expected and predicted by the media. Instead, there has been a 'movement of students in favour of open universities' in support of the reforms and the introduction of accountability (Lakasas, 2011).

Consequently, along with the traumatic process of economic austerity, it seems that the debt crisis has initiated a process of profound change in the Greek society, which could be proven to be the greatest opportunity for the future generations of Greeks.

Footnotes and References:

[1] The opinions and arguments expressed in this article are based on the author's personal views. The material in Greek was translated by the author on the basis of his perception and interpretation of the terms.

[2] PIGS = Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain

[3] In 2011 the Greek Ministry of Education assigned to OECD to produce a report about the state of the Greek Education sector.

[4] In 2010 the Greek government created an independent committee composed by nine external members to assess the organisation of Greek universities.

[5] Greek Ministry of Education, Life Long Learning, and Religious Affairs (2011) Δομή, λειτουργία, διασφάλιση της ποιότητας των σπουδών και διεθνοποίηση των ανωτάτων εκπαιδευτικών ιδρυμάτων. Available from: www.aueb.gr/pages/news/attachments/1174_a.pdf

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