

Greek Debt Crisis and Internationalisation of Higher Education: Review of the Dialogue on the New Proposed National Strategy [1]

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The recent debt crisis brought Greece at the centre of the world's attention, mostly for all the negative reasons. A lot has been said about the causes of the Greek debt crisis and even more about the role of International Monetary Fund in imposing its Structural Adjustment Programmes. In May 9th 2010 Greece signed the memorandum of understanding which incorporates a list of reforms and policy directives developed by the co-called "Troika" consisting of the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission. A substantial part of the proposed reforms and policies is targeting the rationalisation of the Greek public sector. One of the heavily debated and criticised sub-sectors within the wider Greek public sector is the Higher Education (HE). According to the article 16 in the Greek constitution, HE in Greece is provided only by the state prohibiting the establishment and operation of other than public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Hellenic Parliament, 2008). In June 2010 the Greek Ministry of Education [2] initiated an open dialogue about the reforms needed to restore efficiency and transparency in the Greek HEIs. A great portion of the comments in this open debate was about the inefficiencies of HEIs resulted by the problematic relationship between the Greek governments and the Greek citizens (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011a, p. 2-3). In this respect, one of the issues raised in this open debate and in previous studies is the pursuit of personal interests from a part of the academic community in the public HEIs and its effect to the deterioration of quality, reputation, and international standing of Greek HEIs (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011a; Meghir, Vayanos, & Vettas, 2010). During a recent open discussion about the Greek HE organised by the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, the Dean of the Medical School of the University of Athens, Prof. Moutsopoulos, said '...from the 700 academics in the medical school 104 of them are close relatives of existing professors in the school' (Kathimerini, 2011) and as the Rector of the Aristotelion Polytechnic of Thessaloniki, Prof. Milopoulos, pointed out 'the governance and management model [of universities] of the past has failed. This model created illegal practices such as nepotism, corruption and xenophobia' (Kathimerini, 2011). The above extracts are some of the

examples of the public debate which has started after the outbreak of the debt crisis concerning the Greek HE sector and its enduring problems. In November 2010 the Greek ministry of education published for open discussion a set of proposals for significant reforms in the Greek HE system (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011). These proposals are part of a general plan for creating a new National Strategy for Higher Education. Among the sections of the proposals there is a section about the internationalisation of Greek HEIs (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011, section 3 p. 26). In the past, Greece has been extremely protectionist of its higher education (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007) and a constant opponent of many European policies attempting to reform higher education (Jacobs & Van der Ploeg, 2006). Hence, the inclusion of internationalisation related policies in the recently published proposals is something which is worth writing about. The section which refers to the internationalisation related actions and policies is titled 'Enhancement of the International Character of HEIs, in direct relation with the Country's new growth model: an integrated National Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education' (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011, section 3 page 26). Before moving on in analysing the section's content, it is evidently clear from its title, that there is a new focus of the Greek government on internationalisation. The proposal is aiming both in the co-called internationalisation at home (i.e. International dimension and character of programmes and faculty) and internationalisation abroad (i.e. international presence) of public HEIs (Knight, 2004). The rationale behind the proposed internationalisation strategy is based on the need of Greece to respond to the challenges brought into the surface by the recent economic crisis. These challenges are mainly the by-products of a lasting mentality in the Greek society about the role and the expectations from the welfare state and the political system. In the proposal document the ministry of education argues that the old economic model which was based on creating and maintaining competitiveness via low labour cost has now reached its end (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011b). The Greek government acknowledges the need for a new strategic direction and adoption of a new growth model. It goes on to argue for



a new growth model which will combine economic prosperity and social cohesion. This growth model has to promote sustainable competitiveness within the global economy. As it is mentioned in the proposals document the Greek government realises the necessity to reposition the country within the globalised marketplace and that one of the causes for the recent debt crisis was its inability to do so in the past. According to the Greek ministry of education key forces for the adoption of this new growth model are the well educated people, the new technology, and the promotion of continuous innovation and entrepreneurship. The main overall objective would be to create a multicultural, open and permissive society. In achieving this aim the prerequisites, according with the proposal, are the human capital and a creative and innovative environment. The Greek ministry of education proposes a comprehensive and integrated internationalisation strategy for HE, thus placing HE at the top of list with the policies and reforms which are needed to implement the new economic growth model. The proposed internationalisation strategy aims in creating extroverted HEIs with international presence based on academic excellence. Additionally, the strategy targets the creation of internationally recognised and accredited HE programmes capable of attracting students and academic staff from other countries. As mentioned earlier the new proposed internationalisation strategy of the Greek government is focusing both in actions which promote the international reputation and involvement of HEIs and the enhancement of the international dimension of HE programmes. Some of the specific proposals of the Greek Ministry of Education are (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011, p.26):

- Offer support to Greek HEIs to establish franchises in other countries.
- Introduce programmes delivered in English which will be accredited by international bodies aiming to recruit students from other countries.
- Join funding and delivery of postgraduate programmes between Greek HEIs and reputable foreign HEIs. These programmes will be in subject areas which will reflect Greece's competitive advantages and existence of critical mass (i.e. Shipping, Tourism).
- Introduction of visiting professorships and encourage exchange visits of academic staff between Greek HEIs and International HEIs.
- Increase the HEIs' autonomy in initiating academic partnerships at international level.
- Promote mergers between HEIs and research institutes to enhance their international presence.
- Full adoption of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to promote mobility of students and staff.
- New selection and recruitment process for academic staff involving external panels members with international reputation and recognition.
- Establishing externally funded/sponsored professorships.
- Establishing and adopting the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in an effort to promote transparency and recognition of the Greek and foreign qualifications.

For those familiar with the global higher education sector and literature, all the above may seem as 'business as usual' within the HE internationalisation context, thus would not see it as a reason to write an article. But for those who are familiar with the Greek HE system and reality, each of the above proposals summarise a radical reform plan which is very far from what was expected from a socialist government. For many years, since the restoration of democracy in 1974, the Greek governments diachronically have contributed in the creation of an inefficient HE sector. During the last 37 years different governments, irrespective of their political affiliations, have supported and bred a higher education system which is reproducing social inequality (Giamouridis & Bagley, 2006) and is partly responsible for the significant 'brain drain' phenomenon in Greece. Retaining higher education as monopoly of the state had a considerable social cost and is to some extent responsible for turning Greece into one of the top three student exporting countries worldwide (Psacharopoulos, 2003). The political

cost was always a factor which contributed to the reluctance of Greek governments to push enough for the implementation of reforms and changes. Thus it should be stressed that much of the today's inefficiency and diminished international standing of the Greek HEIs is primarily an outcome of the lack of both the appropriate policies and the determination to implement change. Reviewing the proposed internationalisation strategy of HE in Greece, in relation with similar internationalisation strategies and policies of other countries, it appears to be targeted at the right direction. Overall it is a set of proposals which aims to open up Greek HEIs to the world thus increasing their student population and operation transparency. But how these reforms have been welcomed by the main stakeholders, namely the students and the academics? In January 2011 the Greek Ministry of education conducted a survey aiming to capture students' opinion in regards to proposed reforms (Greek Ministry of Education, 2011b), 85,7 percent of the students perceive the proposed internationalisation reforms as beneficial for their future. At the top of students' priorities are the recruitment of professors who teach at international universities and the joint funding of postgraduate programmes between Greek HEIs and top International Universities. The vast majority to students (81%) and parents (83,1%) believe that Greek HEIs - and consequently their graduates - are responding to the requirements of the employment market. These findings provide an indication on how the proposed reforms are accepted by the Greek students and parents, and reflect their concerns about the current state of Greek HEIs. Is an internationalisation strategy, such as the one proposed by the Greek government, viable for Greek HEIs? Currently an exemption that proves the rule is the Athens University of Economics and Business which operates successfully an international MBA for more than 15 years [3]. This AMBA accredited course is ranked among the top 10 MBA programmes in Europe and during its operation it has attracted students from all over the world achieving international reputation and recognition. Thus, Greek HEIs have the potential by utilising these parts of their excellent human capital in adopting and successfully implementing the proposed internationalisation strategy. It remains to be seen if this internationalisation strategy will be adopted, appropriately promoted, supported and implemented by the Greek government. Hopefully change will be in depth and in a scale and

speed necessary to overcome the chronically problems of the higher education in Greece.

[1] In this article, there are various parts which, have been translated from Greek to English by the Author. This translation reflects the Author's perception of the terms.

[2] The full title is Greek Ministry of Education, Life Long Learning, and Religious Affairs. For presentation purposes in this paper the title used inside the text is Greek Ministry of Education.

[3] Information can be found at: <http://www.imba.aueb.gr/>

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