

Neoliberal policy and Higher Education in Europe: the case of Greece¹

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1. Neoliberalism and Higher Education

Since the '70s, modern societies started moving into a new management model of the capitalist economy, the main characteristics of which are less state control and domination of the market, while at an ideological level are expressed through the ideas of monetarism and neoliberalism. The most distinctive examples of the new model were introduced in the USA and the UK during the Reagan and Thatcher governance accordingly.

The new era is also characterized by the rapid development of new technologies (the so – called “Information Society”) and the demand for “useful” knowledge (“Knowledge Society”). Universities – as the main loci of production, re – production and dissemination of knowledge – are asked and expected to play a catalyst role. Already since the '80s, the OECD has published a series of researches and documents³ pointing on the new role universities are expected and should play in the emerging “Knowledge Society”. Taking into consideration the OECD “conclusions and advice”, the E.U. has stressed itself too the importance for the co – ordination of the European higher education systems and the formation of a Higher Education Area. In the mids of the '90s, the publication of the White Paper on Education and Training “Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society” (1995) officially marked and confirmed the rising E.U interest on education, while a series of initiatives, declarations and communiqués agreed upon and signed by Ministers of Education in Europe (starting with the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 and the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and reaching up to the London communiqué in 2007) suggested the establishment of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010.

2. EU and Higher Education

Furthermore, as mentioned in the strategic goal set by the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the EU should be made “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”, implying thus the prece-

dence of the European economy against that of the USA. European universities should play a decisive role in accomplishing this target. The term “Knowledge Economy” – often used in official and unofficial documents – verifies the advanced role higher education institutions are expected to play in mobilizing economy. Nevertheless, in order to adjust to the new demands, important changes should be made in the universities' operation and structure.

According to the Lisbon Strategy and the official documents of the EU⁴ there are 3 main challenges for the European higher education and these are to: 1) increase and diversify the universities' funding, 2) improve their governance, and 3) improve their quality and make them more attractive.

The Lisbon Strategy goal and the three challenges concise in the best way the idea that penetrates all declarations and communiqués (From Sorbonne – 1998 – to London – 2007). The analysis of these targets and steps (as drawn by the E.U. documents) reaffirm in a direct or indirect way the submission of science, research and knowledge (and consequently universities) to the demands of the capital. In other words, higher education is expected to follow the neoliberal model of development and operate in terms of capitalist competition and free market rules. Furtherdown, we have chosen and sketched out only some of the changes that take or are going to take place in the higher education area across Europe.

In university research for example, there is a clear – and almost exclusive – shift to applied research⁵. Research is thus more openly submitted to the demands of the capital – than that of the society. Especially in the applied sciences, research is expensive (labs, scientific instruments etc), and there is a rising need for more financing which is usually sought in private funding and sponsors directly benefited by the “useful” scientific knowledge and results. It is not surprising thus, that the scientist or researcher focuses on issues related to the demands of the sponsor. The universities are turned into competitive enterprises that sell educational services and research products⁶. It is also obvious that research in non – profitable areas (e.g. the humanities) is and will be even more limited.

Moreover, specialization is introduced “to meet the demands of a changing economy”. Specialization is unavoidable. The suggested way of specialization though, abolishes the idea of the “academic department” as covering a scientifically unified cognitive area. New departments are set up that cover only a limited aspect of a scientific field and new flexible programme studies are introduced. The focus shifts from (university) studies on a specific science, to short – run training studies. The graduate thus acquires mainly practical and useful specialized knowledge and skills which are usually “short – lived” and need to be renewed later in some sort of life – long learning institution (most probably a private one).

The early specialization especially at an undergraduate level – that is before a student acquires its scientific cohesion – doesn’t produce scientists but scientifically trained specialists in extremely limited (each time according to the demands of the labour market) fields of social knowledge. The result is a limited view, understanding and critical perception of reality, while at the same time the working privileges and rights of the “new type of scientists” are set in danger.

Nevertheless, a clarifying remark should be made. Learning is a liberating and endless process. Especially today that the mass of new information is constantly growing, there is an important and actual need for people to renew and complement their existing knowledge. That can be achieved either through a process of self – learning or through organized forms of re – education and new professional training. The idea of lifelong learning is to have a worthy meaning when it is referred to an educational process spread (lifelong) throughout human life and is set under the collective responsibility of the society (through the appropriate each time – stately organized – educational institutions). It is not just about a superficial re-training, but it is related to re-educating people on their science and renewing their cultural “equipment” in order to think critically and be active citizens on issues arising in the society⁷.

Through the introduction of 2 cycles of studies (3+2) – as suggested originally in the Bologna Declaration – the clear distinction of students is implied. The majority will complete the first cycle of studies and will directly be introduced into the labour market, while the few, who will decide to continue to a postgraduate level, will consist the future managerial elite. “The mass universities, being first of all in charge of training students, are supposed to quickly hurry the mass of Bachelor graduates through their studies in order of being able to cope with the expect-

ted flood of students without additional staff...only about 30% of all students is supposed to stay at university after having achieved their B.A...Only some small, selected groups will be granted a look at research before their first qualifying graduation. The others will have to wait for their Master studies...E.g. as already decided by the classical technical universities (the so – called T9), they will accept the B.A. as a qualification for Master studies only if it was achieved at one of their member universities. This means that these universities counting for themselves among the elite are already beginning to close off from others”⁸.

That brings us to the issue of private universities. On the one hand there are private universities, whose status undermines right from the start the very idea of a free and public education. On the other hand, there arises a new problem, where the “university universality” is replaced by the “supremacy” to a specific field, which is related to private funding interests. The model of the “University of Excellence” dictates specialization to a specific branch, where a specific institution will have to prevail in the competition with other affiliated institutions. Consequently, specialization is attached to competition and is associated to private interests. According to a survey held by the Advisory Council of the Research Councils [of England] in 1987, it was suggested that there should be a first/top category of 15 institutions which will focus on top research (and will be accordingly funded), a second category of the next 15 institutions that will be involved in high quality research but on less costly issues and finally a third category of all the rest institutions that will be mainly involved in teaching at an under – and postgraduate level and its research will be minimal⁹. It is obvious that the prospect of international organizations is to create 2 – 3 student categories and corresponding categories of institutions.

Last but not least comes the issue of quality assurance. The funding of the universities and the viability of departments and/or faculties will be determined by “ranking” and the market rules of “competitiveness” (if the market needs graduates with specific knowledge, then the specific department has grounds for existence). “Expertise” of “external evaluation” (chosen from the “European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies”, including public, private and professional agencies) will be responsible for evaluating the programme studies of all departments¹⁰. The results of that external evaluation will define the funding of the department and, most of all, its right to grant degrees. In

other words, an external, uncontrolled mechanism will decide whether a department should exist or not. Given the situation that exists in higher education institutions, the “evaluation” of the academic and research work is made based on market criteria of competitiveness and efficiency, which means that departments or faculties that do not “heal” non – competitive areas will be degraded or even shut down.

3. The Bolkenstein Directive – GATS – Higher Education

As mentioned, the basic idea explicitly set forth in the Lisbon Strategy is to make the European economy the most competitive economy in the world. Within this context, the “Bolkenstein Directive”¹¹ – concerning the liberalization of services – gave a new impetus to the Lisbon Strategy. It is a proposal for a Directive on Services in the EU Internal Market, that seeks to open Europe's service sector to more competition.

The Directive touched upon services of an economic nature but didn't protect services of a general interest (e.g. that of education) from competition since the dividing line between services of a general interest (SIG) and services of general economic interest (SIEG) is quite blur. According to the exact wording, the directive doesn't apply to: “non economic activities, nor activities performed by the State for no consideration as part of its social, cultural, education and judicial functions where there is no element of remuneration”¹². A very unclear definition, given the various ways in which national education systems, though public, can also be partly funded by private means (e.g. in research). How can the boundary between an education activity of a non-economic nature and an education activity of an economic nature be drawn? In other words, in the official text, there is no direct exception of it being applied on education.

The main tool (and a cornerstone of the Bolkenstein Directive), introduced to facilitate trade, is the country-of-origin-principle: the services provider is only obliged to comply with the rules and regulations of the country of establishment, not the country in which the services are provided. The suggestions of the Directive though, for the implementation and provision of services from one country to another, are not compatible with the European policy on education, according to which the EU Member States retain the responsibility to define the content of teaching and the organization of the education system¹³

while the EU can adopt only recommendations and incentive measures.

On the other hand, the initiatives (declarations, communiqués etc) taken by the Ministers of Education show an effort (or even anxiety) for the coordination and divergence of the higher education systems across Europe. The Member States will judge the efficiency of their systems based on the targets set at a European level and according to the results of the other countries. In this way, a mechanism is promoted, thanks to which the Member States agree to converge their educational policies. Harmonization may still be prohibited, but the actions suggested, show a tendency towards a future removal of any prohibition for harmonization. The removal of barriers will most probably facilitate the application of the country-of-origin-principle to the cross-border provision of education services. The right of each Member State to fully regulate its education sector will be reduced, while education will gradually be considered a service of general economic interest.

In case education is included in trade in services internally in the EU, there will be pressure to include education in GATS agreements too. The demands of important commercial partners of the EU aim at the removal of the state responsibility for higher education¹⁴. There is already a huge “market of education services” (private schools, centres, colleges, life – long learning institutions etc), in which public universities should also become part of and in equal terms to private enterprises. The complete liberalization of that market will be achieved through the GATS in WTO or the Bolkenstein Directive. In other words, the liberalization of higher education within the GATS framework supports and is supported by the establishment of a common European Higher Education Area¹⁵.

The general concept of a common European Higher Education Area is indeed based on an actual need for co-operation and co-ordination of higher education systems across Europe. The ideas and suggestions for easily acknowledged and comparable degrees, the promotion of mobility of students and teaching staff, the European co – operation on quality issues etc are interesting. The way though the European Ministers of Education have chosen and agreed on to implement the suggestions moves along the lines of the neoliberal policy, where everything is seen as a commodity and “valued” based almost exclusively on economic and market criteria¹⁶. The concept for university is based on a purely economic – commercialized – utilitarian idea. At the same time privatization – implicitly or explicitly – has more or less

entered most spheres of higher education. Education is treated more like a commodity and tradable good than as a universal right and public good¹⁷.

4. The situation in Greece

Although Greece was involved right from the start to the discussions of the Bologna process, few measures had up until recently been introduced to meet the Bologna goals. Any attempts that were made, fell flat and remained inactive either because the original planning was not clear or due to the academic community movements¹⁸. The academic year 2006 – 2007, the educational area was again in turmoil. The attempts of the Ministry of Education to revise an article of the Greek Constitution (the basic parts of which secure free higher education, public financing of the higher education institutions, freedom of research and teaching and the prohibition of the establishment of private higher education institutions) and to introduce the new framework conditioning the operation of higher education institutions, met strong opposition by students and teaching staff.

The Greek educational system is one of the most centralized and – as remarked by the OECD – “less flexible” systems in Europe. All stages of education are public and free. As far as the universities are concerned, they are Legal Entities of Public Law, and students don’t pay fees at an undergraduate level and they don’t pay for the books either¹⁹. The main providers of higher education in Greece are the Universities (AEI) and Technological Education Institutes (TEI). There are 20 AEI with 237 departments in total and 14 TEI, with 176 departments. The latter were established in the ‘80s as a sort of post – secondary education, but they were soon included in higher education. Their basis was the attempt to satisfy the rising public demand for access to higher education and the social need for the practical applications of the scientific knowledge that was produced at a university level²⁰.

Students are admitted to AEI and TEI according to their performance at national level examinations taking place at the second and third grade of senior high school (Lykeio). As in most European countries university education lasts between 4 – 6 years, although there is no restriction as to the years a student may remain registered. After graduation the students can go directly into the labor market or decide to follow a postgraduate course. Postgraduate courses vary between 1 – 2 years and most of them are for free (though the last years some offered postgraduate courses have introduced fees). Later on, a gradua-

te may decide to start a PhD. During 2003-2006, around 76.500 students were accepted annually to AEI and TEI, while the total number of students registered at a state higher education institute was (in 2003 – 2004) approximately 353.000. During the same year, 29.477 students graduated from AEI and TEI, 5.012 were attending a postgraduate course, while 1.296 were registered as PhD students²¹.

There are also different types of post – secondary education, both public and private. Since we are more interested here in private interests, market forces etc, we will focus in the latter category, where 2 main types of post – secondary institutions can be found. The first includes the so called “IIEK” which are private enterprises offering post – secondary vocational training (mainly in finance, management, computer science and the humanities). The second one involves “colleges” and the so-called “Liberal Arts Centres”, which operate either as official branches of foreign universities or as co-operating partners with foreign institutions²². The duration of studies in all private centres lasts 3 years.

According to the statistics 3.000 – 4.000 students register annually in the second category of private centres. The number of their students corresponds to 3,5 % of those entering a state higher education institution²³. The students that decide to register at a private centre are usually students, who didn’t succeed in the entrance examinations for higher education but the need for better employment prospects urges them to the private sector. Both types of post – secondary education though recognized at the private sector (sometimes worse paid than a university degree), their degrees do not correspond to those granted by Greek higher educational institutions and are not recognized (yet) in the public sector as the equivalent of Greek public university degrees.

Nevertheless, according to a decision of the European Court, Greece is forced (from October onwards) to recognize the degrees provided by these “centres and colleges” and to recognize equal professional rights to their graduates as those graduating from state universities. In other words, although the revision of the article 16 of the Greek Constitution didn’t proceed, the legal framework for the establishment of non – public or private “universities” has been set by the E.U. It is estimated that after “recognition” the percent of those graduates will raise to 5 – 6 % of the total number entering state higher education institutions. Additionally, the graduates will enjoy full and equal professional rights as those graduating from a state institution, having studied less years in comparison to the latter.

At the same time, the government introduced the new framework for the operation of higher education institutions. Here lay a controversy. The government suggested the new framework, being sure that the revision of the article 16 of the Greek Constitution will be voted through by the Parliament. That, didn't happen. Having outrun the revision, the framework has lots of controversial points to the Constitution (e.g. there is no longer any reference to the obligation of the state to finance higher education although that is contrary to the Constitution).

Moreover, according to its 1st article, universities have the mission – amongst other things – “to respond to and cope with the social, cultural, educational and developmental needs of the society, following and adopting the principles of sustainable development and social cohesion”. Knowing how the ambiguous phrases “sustainable development and social cohesion” are translated in a neoliberal context, it is easy for the reader to realize the dedication to the “ideological dogmas of neoliberalism as a principle in essence superior to that of the academic freedom”²⁴.

As far as the rest parts of the law are concerned:

1. The financing of higher education institutions will be made on the basis of “4-years academic – developmental programmes” (“contracts”). Each university will negotiate on a one – to – one basis with the Ministry of Education, present the result of its evaluation, its academic and developmental plan for the next years, and ask a specific sum for its financing. It is obvious that is an ad hoc unfair agreement since one partner possesses a complete negotiating superiority (e.g. state funding) in comparison to the other. There lies the danger that the Ministry could (indirectly) contest or negotiate not only the economic terms but the strategic elements of each institution for its development, too. According to the Greek Constitution though, the State is obliged to finance all universities and not part of them or under conditions. Under the new framework the State exercises strict control and the self-sufficiency of the university is violated, since each university will be judged according to the degree of fulfillment to the targets dictated by the government.
2. In order for a new department to be established, it should justify prospects of graduates' employability, which means that it could be more “useful” to establish a department of “floriculture and landscape architecture” than a Philosophy department. But even beyond that. Which scientific area can in

practice guarantee prospects of future employability for its graduates, not only in Greece but all over the world, when the market needs are fluid and easily changeable?²⁵

3. The drawing up of internal by – laws for the universities must be compatible with a model drawn by the National Council for Education. That obligation violates the academic self – existence of the university and the freedom to decide on its own operational terms. Any institution that doesn't comply to the proposed model will probably have consequences in funding or may be even shut down until it complies to the rules!
4. Under the new operational framework the heads of the Secretariats of the Universities will not only exercise administrative, economic and technical duties (managers) but will also be responsible for the implementation of the “internal by – law”. The administrative self – sufficiency of the university is set in danger in the sense that an (administrative) executive and not the members of the academic community is responsible for its governance. Moreover, the managers cannot but be persons favored by each government, let alone that the logic of profits and losses is introduced into universities which are turned into enterprises.
5. Last but not least comes the issue of the university asylum. Up until now, the asylum involved the areas within and around university. Under the new law, the university asylum is renamed into “academic asylum” that covers only the areas where teaching and research are practiced”. The state control enters the university institutions. The free movement of ideas is set under doubt.

The idea that penetrates the law is obvious. It distinctly moves along the principles of neoliberalism, where everything is seen as a possible source for profit – through privatisation. But, the low competitiveness of the local economy is – among other things – due to the low investments in education, research and development. In other words, it is the governmental choices and priorities along with the enterprising hesitation for new investments that define competitiveness. The needed skilled and scientific labor force exists. The idea of the new framework though, reverses the setting. It puts the blame on education and tries to scorn the “effectiveness” and “quality” of public higher education until public opinion believes that privatisation (in the sense of tuition fees, private interests in research, private universities etc) is the answer to it.

Even on a European scale, higher education is scorned. The neoliberal priorities promote segmented and useful knowledge and two – gear – students. The role of education is more and more limited to that of a machine producing new and trained specialists for the labor market. Basic research is marginalized. The role of the State as the basic funding source is more and more restricted and new demands for more private initiatives in the higher education sector are openly expressed. The basis of the European university as formed during the last three centuries is radically changed.

5. Towards an alternative approach

The Enlightenment ideal suggested a close interconnection between knowledge and freedom. The acquisition and formation of knowledge is a liberating process (liberation from ignorance, prejudice, superstitions, fear etc). In other words, education – as the systematic provision of cohesive locus is concerned. Nevertheless, the European educational policy seems to move further and further from the Enlightenment ideal and that is alarming.

For centuries now, the university (as locus for the production, re – production and dissemination of knowledge) has tried to preserve its operational, research and teaching autonomy both against the economic interests of the market and any suffocating state guardianship. One of its basic aims has been to initiate students in developing critical knowledge and thought. These conditions cannot be fulfilled when other interests than the academic ones penetrate universities. How possible is it for private universities – for example – to secure and guarantee academic freedom? Will the market forces favor critical thought? Rather, not.

All universities have internal democratically elected bodies, responsible for the even operation of the institutions. Most of the times, teaching – research staff, students and administrative staff participate on equal terms in these bodies. Moreover, professors and researchers are regularly evaluated through the work they produce and their overall presence in the society. In other words, there are evaluation mechanisms that can secure and promote quality. The challenge is to make the existing ones function effectively and not to introduce new and external ones (consisting of “experts and managers”, who have little to do with the university area). Universities can define their terms of operation on their own within the framework of academic freedom.

Additionally, the direct submission of the university studies and research to the market demands causes skepticism, since the market needs are fluid and easily changeable. Instead, students should be introduced to the principles of their science, forming thus a spherical view of it and becoming acquainted with its inter – connectedness with other scientific fields and the society. Only in this way can the students be really “flexible” and adapt to the changing demands. In any other case they will have to re-train themselves again and again, acquiring segmented knowledge – of their science and reality – without any internal cohesion, while losing valuable time and perhaps money going over and over again the same procedure. Education should aim at the cultivation of the overall personality of people rather than just the re – training on tradable skills, while research must touch upon the real needs of the society and be equally balanced with teaching.

As a concluding remark, it is worth to be mentioned that education has a double mission. It provides (esp. higher education) cohesive and systematic knowledge on a specific scientific field (both as far as its theory and its practical applications are concerned). On the other hand, it focuses (regardless stage) on the creative development of essential knowledge which will transform people into “free and responsible citizens”²⁶. Education should thus be a public good, accessible to all, since it creates conscientious citizens, who promote and stabilize democracy. A basic pre – supposition is that the state should continue to fund education through a system of general taxation.

It is important to become understood that it is through education that the future of the democratic societies can be secured and the prospect of a European Union of and for the people can be developed. Education should be based and promote other principles than that of profit. Its responsibility lies in the spread of humanistic values like that of social solidarity and social responsibility. The stabilization, enrichment and deepening of democracy can be achieved through an open educational system that addresses all and does not exclude anyone.

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- 1) Paper presented at the PRESOM workshop on education privatisation, 29 June 2007, Ljubljana, Slovenia.
 - 2) Toliou Rosa (MA in European Studies) is a PhD student at the department of Political Science and Public Administration, National University of Athens – Greece.
 - 3) “Education in modern society” (1985), “Universities under scrutiny”(1987), etc

- 4) “The role of the universities in Europe of Knowledge”, “Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy”, “Reform of the universities in the framework of the Lisbon strategy”
- 5) “Applied research” focuses on research on issues for their entrepreneurial exploitation, and in some cases quite irrelevant to the educational process while “basic research” is related to research for fundamental scientific issues closely associated to the educational dimension (see: Μαυρουδέας, Σ. (2005), «Οι τρεις εποχές του Πανεπιστημίου», Αθήνα, Ελληνικά Γράμματα, pg. 102). Basic research was more dominant in the post war years
- 6) It is clearly mentioned in: “The role of the universities in Europe of Knowledge”, as a means of securing funds.
- 7) Σταμάτης, Κ.(2007), «Η αβέβαιη κοινωνία της γνώσης», Αθήνα, εκδ. Σαββάλας, pg.139 – 140
- 8) Hartmann Michael, “The initiative of Excellence – a Change of Paradigm of German University Policy”, Leviathan, 6/2006, pg. 450
- 9) Μαυρουδέας, Σ., pg. 129
- 10) Recommendation of the Council and of the European Parliament on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education
- 11) It was first presented in January 2004 and was recently slightly amended and voted through by the European Parliament
- 12) Proposal for a “Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council” on services in the internal market, COM(2004) 2, p.20
- 13) Education is an area of national policy and harmonization of the education systems is prohibited. The only exception is the branch of vocational training.
- 14) Scherrer, C., “Bildung als Gegenstand des internationalen Handelsregimes”, in Globalisierung und Bildung – Jahrbuch fuer Paedagogik, Frankfurt, P.Lang Verlag, pg. 177
- 15) Scherrer, pg. 186
- 16) The idea of a system of easily recognisable and comparable degrees – for example – promotes mobility of students and teaching staff, helps people to become acquainted with European cultures, develops inter and multi – cultural awareness etc. Its implementation though (as suggested by the EU documents) creates skepticism. It will be based on “credits gained inside or outside the university”. Who will provide the credits gained outside the university and according to what criteria?
- 17) Some of the ideas developed in this chapter are based on a speech delivered by Odil Cordelie (Vice-President of the European Trade Unions Committee on Education, ETUCE) on the 16th May 2005 in a conference held by the Nikos Poulantzas Institute on “Neoliberalism in Education: The Bolkenstein Directive/GATS”.
- 18) E.g a law concerning quality assurance and evaluation, though voted by the Parliament, has remained inactive.
- 19) The only exception is the Hellenic Open University, a distance learning university for people having completed the 22 year of age. It is a “second – chance university” and although under the same status with state universities – Legal Entity of Public Law – students have to pay fees and for their books.
- 20) According to the law: “their mission is to provide both theoretical and practical training sufficient for the application of knowledge and skills to the profession”
- 21) A detailed description of the Greek Education System is offered in EURYBASE, the EURYDICE database of the European Education Systems or at the website of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs: www.ypepth.gr
- 22) Most of them are located in Athens and are cooperating mainly with universities in the UK and the USA
- 23) Τρίγκα, Ν., «Σε φοιτητές δύο ταχυτήτων οδηγεί η απόφαση για τα πτυχία», εφημερίδα: Το ΒΗΜΑ, 22/04/2007
- 24) Μπαλτάς, Α., «Η μεταρρύθμιση μας έφτασε εμπρός βήμα ταχύ να την προϋπαντήσουμε, παιδιά, εις τη Βουλή», εφημερίδα: Κυριακάτικη Αυγή, 25.2.07
- 25) Greece – for example – is among the first countries with the highest rates of university graduates unemployment in the EU.
- 26) Σταμάτης, pg.143

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