

FRANCHISED HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF "FREE AND PUBLIC EDUCATION" COUNTRIES: THE GREEK EXAMPLE

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Abstract

Ongoing developments in information and communication technologies, coupled with an emphasis put on the value of knowledge-driven societies, have been vehicles of a worldwide dramatic expansion of the social demand for higher education services, including the emergence of new variables of provision, alternative curricular forms and course contents and also changing qualifications. At the same time, budgetary constraints and infrastructure shortages of the public sector lay down fertile ground for the flourishing of internationalized facets of higher education, questioning traditional "free and public" perceptions and transforming education into a tradable service within the context of a million dollar global market. The establishment of local branch campuses or subsidiaries by foreign universities on the ground of other countries, as well as course offerings by domestic private colleges leading to degrees from foreign universities, appears progressively as an alternative type of higher education provision, which has gained considerable ground in many countries the past few years. The present article will report the situation in Greece, where the growing presence of foreign universities through franchise or validated partnerships with local private organizations seems to play an influential and critical role on the future shaping of the domestic higher education system and is further associated with essential aspects of an administrative and academic nature.

Key words: GATS, Greece, information society, internationalization/commercialization of higher education, knowledge economy.

Post-industrial perceptions of higher education and training

In the era of globalization, Knowledge Economy and Information Society, higher education systems around the world face considerable and unprecedented changes in the way knowledge is perceived, produced, transmitted and received by users. On the one hand, the heightened penetration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the social and financial life of individuals contributes to the minimization of distances, the amplification of student and educational staff mobility and the rapid circulation, process and utilization of knowledge. At the same time, contemporary economic and entrepreneurial activity has switched focus from traditional structures generated by the 18th and 19th century Industrial Revolution to innovative post-industrial productivity models, built on the dematerialization of economy (i.e. the transition to a service economy and the dematerialization of production) and the utmost significance attached to human capital as the new fuel that can keep the engine of development running.

Modern societies tend increasingly to rely on the functional utilization of knowledge for their social and economic prosperity, an axiom that is pretty much reflected upon passionate initiatives and continuous efforts of the European Union “to become 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”¹, as well as “to adapt the education and training systems (i.e. of member-states) to the knowledge-driven society and economy” (European Commission, 2003a). Towards this end, education and training policies are considered essential for rendering human resources a valuable asset and a determining factor of growth and productivity.

In all these, higher education institutions play a critical role in the shaping of the Knowledge Economy and they are called upon to carry out their duty in an increasingly globalised environment, which is constantly changing and is further characterised by growing competition and the emergence of new requirements for which they have not only to cater, but also to forecast. The challenge presented to universities in this respect pertains to their successful adjustment to these new circumstances, aiming particularly to supply students with those skills and qualifications that will enable them to confront the constantly changing scientific, technological and working environment around them. Successful adjustment is conditional upon sharply and positively re-defining universities’ strategic targets so as: (a) to meet increased social demand for higher education², (b) to align with trends of the internationalisation of education and research, (c) to develop effective and close co-operation with the industry sector, (d) to re-organize their teaching methods, understanding the increasing diversification and specialisation of knowledge (European Commission, 2003b).

Effects of the internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of higher education in our days has been possible especially thanks to the new media used for the delivery of programs, which create new variables of provision (cross-sectoral provision, transnational and multinational provision), alternative curricular forms and course contents and also changing qualifications (vocational or continuing certification, “sandwiched” or revised Bachelor’s and Master’s awards, etc. – See Middlehurst, 2001). Enhancement of student and scholar mobility facilitated via mutual exchange programs, credit transfer systems and mechanisms for the formal recognition of foreign degrees and periods of study spent abroad, are also clearly indicative signs of an internationalization process that shapes and affects the character and essence of contemporary higher education.

This process entails, first and foremost, the existence of extroversive educational systems that fear neither re-negotiating aspects of their administrative and academic tradition (such as immovable adherence to “free and public education” conceptions that will concern us here), nor contributing to the formation of an international climate of common educational strategies and objectives through fruitful co-operation and interactive exchange (i.e. educational convergence³), as well as to the establishment of international networks, which are essential to access up-to-date knowledge.

Factors of an economic and social nature are, of course, not to be ignored in their respective power to have been contributing forces in the internationalization of higher education. On the one hand, it is more and more recognized that higher education in many countries suffers from severe public under-investment and budgetary constraints, despite the already high proportions of public expenditure that may be devoted to formal education. The situation, for example, is so clearly evident in some member-states of the European Union, that the Commission has urged the design of new-

1 Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23 & 24 March 2000.

2 This increase has a threefold explanation: From a sociological perspective, the holder of a university degree expects to climb a rung of the social ladder. Talking about workforce productivity and higher job security, the quest for higher education qualifications is connected with a constantly changing and demanding labour force market. Finally, Human Capital theory associates education with future economic returns of individuals, i.e. monthly earnings grow bigger in relation to the highest educational level (primary, secondary, tertiary) one can achieve. See Becker (1964), Mincer (1962), Schultz, (1961), Magoula and Psacharopoulos (1999).

3 A typical example of a central policy towards educational convergence in the European Continent is the Bologna Process, which aims at the construction of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through establishing comparable criteria and methodologies among signatory states.

targeted public investment and the attraction of higher private contributions in addition to public funding (European Commission, 2002).

On the other hand, obvious operational constraints and infrastructure shortages are making it harder and harder for public institutions to satisfy the vast social demand for the attainment of tertiary qualifications in all its dimensions. In this respect, alternative ways of channelling the huge wave of those seeking tertiary qualifications (i.e. innovative forms of higher education provision, such as cross-border or franchised education) come as a remedy to build, complete or strengthen the capacity of local higher education systems, as well as meet the unmet demand (OECD, 2004a).

The worldwide expansion of these new forms is penetrating the classic perception of higher education as a strictly free and public good and is in fact transforming its essence into a service that can be traded within the context of a highly competitive million dollar global market (OECD, 2002)⁴. In view of the internationalization and commercialization trends in the educational services sector, the World Trade Organization has classified higher, post-secondary technical, vocational and adult education under the General Agreement for Trade in Services (GATS), which has been in force since January 1995.

The definition of services trade under the GATS comes in four modes of supply, which as far as education is concerned are as follows: (a) cross-border delivery of education services via internet (distance education, tele-education), (b) consumption abroad (movement of students from one country to another), (c) movement of natural persons (e.g. teachers, lecturers and other educational personnel, in order to provide their services overseas), and finally (d) commercial presence (establishment of local branch campuses or subsidiaries by foreign universities on the ground of other countries, course offerings by domestic private colleges leading to degrees from foreign universities).

Evidence of the internationalization of higher education in Greece

The significance of GATS for Greece has been very little in relation to modes (a) and (c) above. This may be explained, on the one hand, by looking at Greece's bad statistics on Information Society indicators (in 2001, there were 8 PC's per 100 inhabitants compared to the EU-15 mean of 31 PC's per 100 inhabitants. Also, the number of internet users was 2 millions back in 2002, the third lowest proportion in the EU-15 – See Eurostat, 2003).

Similarly, Greek higher institutions have a negative record of an introvert attitude in the field of establishing or participating in international academic co-operations, going hand in hand with Greek scholars' low mobility rates and relatively shallow contribution to the promotion of international research and the development of scientific knowledge (Tsoukalis, 2006)^{5 6}. At the same time, the country's share of foreign students participating in tertiary education amounts only to 2.4% in comparison with EU-27 mean of 7.6% (European Commission, 2007), providing clear evidence of the low-level attractiveness of Greek higher institutions to students abroad.

However, GATS relevance to Greece grows bigger in relation to modes (b) and (d). Indeed, Greek students studying in foreign universities abroad amount to approximately 60.000, which is the largest proportion in the world in terms of a "students per million inhabitants" statistical measurement (Psacharopoulos, 2003). At the same time, more than 30.000 students are approximately estimated to attend classes at local private institutions, called "laboratories of liberal studies". These institutions act as domestic commercial agents of foreign universities (mainly UK and USA ones) and offer their programs of study through franchised or validated business partnerships⁷. Available

4 OECD (2002) estimates this trade to have grown over the last few years into a global market of around \$30 billion in 1999. See also Stamoulas (2006a).

5 The main reason for this must be sought in the extremely low proportions of public money (0,61% of the GDP, compared to the EU-27 mean of 1,84% - See European Commission, 2007) invested in Greece on research and development (R&D) projects.

6 Greece's world share of scientific publications has been 0.79% back in 2004 (EU-27 mean: 38.08%), although the truth is that the country exhibits a 6.4% average growth rate in the field between the years 2000 and 2004 (European Commission, 2007).

7 A franchise co-operation means that the local partner simply intervenes for the import of study programs from foreign institutions, whereas in validation partnerships the local agent designs his own programs of study and offers them for attendance only after they have been approved by the respective institution which is held responsible for the congregation of degrees.

types of study pertain to all levels of university attendance and degrees (Bachelor, Master, as well as Doctoral degrees) and to a wide variety of teaching subjects (from computer science to tourism management, from film and TV studies to social sciences and from maritime and law studies to construction and project management).

Franchised higher education in Greece is a booming and profitable business sector, attracting considerable private investments and showing a permanent upward tendency the last five years (ICAP, 2005). One can confirm that by merely considering the size of the advertising campaigns that "hit" the media every year and the fierce competition among franchisors for the enticement of new students.

Strangely enough, laboratories of liberal studies manage to survive financially and expand, despite the fact that they are hosted within the boundaries of an extremely traditional "free and public education" country, such as Greece, who maintains strict laws against any form of private involvement in higher education and proclaims an indisputable denial when it comes to conferring official recognition status to laboratories similar to their public counterparts.

The job gets done courtesy of article 16 of the country's Constitution, which stipulates that higher education is provided free at public institutions and that the operation of private universities is prohibited. Along the same lines, Bill 1966 of 1991 foresees heavy penalties for improper use of definitions like "university", "college", "academy" or "school" in the corporate names of laboratories. Last but not least, the country's formal organisation for the accreditation of foreign higher education qualifications (Hellenic NARIC) is by law deprived of any jurisdiction to deal with for-profit, non-public providers operating at home, thus being unable to apply evaluation criteria on programs and institutions, even if it is about franchised departments of proper European Union universities (Stamoulas, 2006c).

Even in such a hostile and biased environment with deep legal roots, however, the commercial presence of foreign universities in the form of local branch campuses has been the inevitable outcome of the reasons we discussed earlier, i.e. mainly of the inability of the state to satisfy the vast demand, which in Greece has increased by an outstanding 35, 5% the last decade (author-processed data from Eurydice, 2005).

Critical was also the role performed by European pressures, expressed via the texts of Directives 89/48/EEC "On a general system for the recognition of higher-education diplomas awarded on completion of professional education and training of at least three years' duration" and the most recent 2005/36/EC for the "Recognition of professional qualifications", which asks member-states for formal recognition of foreign degrees as long as: (a) the training course at the establishment which gave the training has been formally certified by the educational establishment based in the member-state of origin of the award, (b) the evidence of formal qualifications issued is the same as that which would have been awarded if the course had been followed entirely in the member-state of origin of the award, and (c) the evidence of formal qualifications confer the same professional rights in the territory of the member-state of origin of the award.

Problematic implications of "free and public" conceptions about higher education in relation to its internationalized orientation

From the moment they appeared for the first time until today, laboratories of liberal studies have been operating in the margins of the typical educational system (i.e. they are not classified within the ISCED levels of education) and the issue of a Presidential Decree for the prompt incorporation of Directive 2005/36/EC into Greek law order is still pending. Typically, the situation at the moment is somehow oxymorous: there exists no legal mechanism to deter students from attending classes at a laboratory, nor is it illegal for a businessman to set up one; nevertheless, one's own awarded qualification does not grant him the academic and professional rights of a public degree, thus creating sharp dichotomies among graduates of the public and the franchised higher education sector as far as future options on career choice and development are concerned.

Conservative educational policy-makers appointed in crucial decision-making state positions,

a deeply embedded culture of a stiff centralized institutional management all these years⁸, as well as an active group of university professor trade unionists, whose principal pursuit is to preserve the "free and public" status quo, have fueled the main driving force behind the methodical construction of a socio-political propaganda in favour of the public higher education system and against any other recognised form of private activity in the Greek tertiary sector (Stamoulas, 2006a and 2006b).

Strong negative attitudes towards forms of higher education supply other than free and state-provided are customarily gathered around daunting arguments about the potential "McDonaldization"⁹ of education, the creation of a market-oriented system that will alienate its humanistic ideal, and the severe depreciation of the public system (Theotokas, 2005; Papadimitriou, 2003). Usually, such arguments come with a concerted opposition against so-called "new public management" approaches in higher education, which for Barbara Sporn (2003) are best described as a trendy fusion of public and private institutional management, combined with the unbundling of vertically integrated organizations, marketization (the move of universities towards more entrepreneurial behaviour and private-industry mechanisms) and the quality movement.

It would not be wrong in this instance to consider the immovable adherence to free and public conceptions in education as one of the main reasons why Greek higher institutions have not been able all these years to develop an entrepreneurial behaviour at home and abroad, permitting them to play a crucial role as exporters of learning services in today's global striving educational market and to harvest the benefits of ensuring increased revenue on their own, next to their upgraded international academic prestige and standing.

Far from it, placement of alternative forms of higher education provision, such as franchised provision, in the margins of the typical education system and under a non-recognition status (i.e. independently of a detailed legislative framework, setting out concrete standards and conditions of academic operation, accreditation, quality standards, as well as licensing requirements) raises important questions for the whole higher education structure of the country alike in relation to institutional management and effectiveness, efficiency of investments, and the consequences caused by a reluctance to align with central European policy-making:

- (i) Due to differences with conventional (i.e. public) provision of higher education, these new forms challenge existing quality assurance systems and require thorough check of the reputation of the new providers, the educational process, the curriculum design and course contents, as well as of the value of outcomes (the offered qualifications)¹⁰. Employers and students need to be able to evaluate the quality of new types of higher education and qualifications, thus introducing the concept of "consumer protection" as an important new perspective and responsibility for governments regarding the quality of internationalized higher education (Van der Wende 1999).

In the Greek case, consumer protection gets even more imperative, taking into consideration some alarming data to be found in the overseas reports (i.e. the reports evaluating the academic co-operations between UK universities and their Greek franchisors) conducted by the English Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)¹¹. These reports reveal a number of gaps and serious weaknesses concerning academic personnel selection procedures, entry requirements and the grading of students.

- (ii) Non-recognition of academic and professional rights of graduates who obtained their degree from a European Union university after a study period spent in the franchised

8 Greek universities are known to enjoy very limited autonomy, given the state's tight control over such strategic issues as establishing or abolishing faculties and departments, post-graduate programs, internal organisational structures for support services and the role, responsibility and functioning of governing bodies and their election. The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs determines human resource issues, including all human resource policies and management systems, the number of staff posts allocated to individual universities and departments and recruitment regulations, faculty remuneration, staff appointment, promotion, social security, pension, etc. (See Bourantas et al, 2001).

9 "McDonaldization" is a term first used by sociologist George Ritzer (1993) to describe the process by which a society takes on the characteristics of a fast-food restaurant ("the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as of the rest of the world").

10 See, for example, what happened with the development of quality assurance in Central and Eastern European countries, where establishment of assessment systems was speeded up in order to evaluate academic curricula and qualifications plentifully offered by universities of Western countries setting up local campuses (Damme et al, 2003).

11 Reports are available at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/byoseascountry.asp>.

department of that university in their country of origin contrasts somehow the “free movement” principle, which is one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by Community law. Indeed, the aforementioned Directive 89/48/EEC foresees one’s possibility to pursue a profession, whether in a self-employed or employed capacity, in a member-state other than that in which he/she acquired his/her professional qualifications. To that purpose, systems for the recognition of higher education diplomas should be serving the right of a Community national to use his/her professional skills in any member-state, while supplementing and reinforcing his/her right to acquire such skills wherever he/she wishes¹².

- (iii) In Greece, the dramatic expansion of higher education over the last couple of decades, as documented by OECD (2004b) and Eurydice (2005) studies, has produced a characteristic increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace, but the areas of academic specialization have not been going hand in hand with developments of the Knowledge Society and new types of job roles. Successful job quest after graduation remains a top factor for students when deciding where and what to study, which highlights the unbreakable relation between acquired knowledge and its utilization for building a professional career (Stamatis, 2001).

Even so, student selection in public universities remains remarkably aloof from human capital demands of the labour market, because the Ministry of Education exerts its absolute selection rights according to the historical capacity of the various faculties, rather than in tune with the demands of the labour market or the cognitive preferences of students (Stamoulas, 2005b. See also Glytsos, 1990). Breaking the “state higher education monopoly” could and most probably would contribute to the enlargement of the list of teaching subjects, mainly of those that are of greater cognitive interest to students and of higher value to the labour force market.

- (iv) Public expenditure covering the whole spectrum of education in Greece amounts to as little as 3.94%¹³ (1.22% intended for tertiary education) of the country’s GDP, relative to the EU-27 average of 5.17% (European Commission, 2007). Tertiary education in Greece is divided into higher (AEI’s) and technological education institutes (TEI’s). Back in 2005, it was estimated that the state spent respectively 3.951 and 1.797 euros per student, displaying a diachronic under-financing tendency. The figures of the state budgets at that time informed us that the overall decline the past five years (in 2003 constant prices) had been 21.5% for students in higher education and 47.2% for students in higher technical institutions, proving that as student numbers increased considerably, public funding increased in a lower rate, failing to raise per head expenditure (Stamoulas, 2005a). Quality-controlled import of franchised higher education in a recognized manner (i.e. conferring to graduates of private institutions the professional and academic rights of a public degree) could probably be used to alleviate declining public funds.
- (v) Given the great exodus of Greek students abroad due to the scarcity of top-choice university places in highly-sought faculties and departments, the country experiences the effects of brain drain¹⁴ and the enfeeblement of national economy¹⁵. Quality-controlled import of franchised higher education in a recognized manner could probably be used to alleviate supply constraints of the public sector and also to limit undesired effects of student exodus abroad.

12 Without, of course, abolishing rights of the member-state in which the professional qualifications are to be used to seek fulfillment of the three-step control procedure provided by Directive 2005/36/EC, as discussed earlier here.

13 Not calculating incoming money from the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and other national resources, invested for the purposes of the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training (O.P. “Education”) being under way in Greece.

14 After completing their studies abroad, a number of talented graduates is absorbed by the international labour market and do not return to their home country, or they may return just near retirement.

15 Based on data about student fees and living expenses in the countries that receive Greek students, it is estimated that the average student spends 12.707 euros per year, almost 743 million euros in total. This is about 10% of the foreign exchange Greece gets from tourism, or half percent of the gross domestic product (See Psacharopoulos, 2003).

(vi) States-educational exporters are fighting an intense competition over the accumulation of the maximum of benefits resulting from the internationalization of education. Competition in higher education is particularly evident in our days between (the traditionally world's bigger education exporter) USA and Europe. The Bologna Process (1999) has placed Europe on the track of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy of the world, drafting a set of measures to upgrade quality in member-states' higher education systems in order to make them attractive to "consumers" worldwide and simultaneously to avert educational migration to the USA and consequent loss of local academic talent. The prize of such competition is double: on the one hand, the large exporter of educational services will consider foreign students as an extra source of national revenue and, on the other, it will have its higher education system winning an international academic reputation that will keep students coming.

Therefore, internationalization trends prevailing in education and research are considered crucial to a central European policy for strengthening the continent's competitiveness in the world map and any obstacles posed against such trends by a member-state may be seen as obstacles undermining the establishment of international education networks, which are essential to access up-to-date knowledge and also to boost economic growth and facilitate social cohesion not only within the boundaries of each member-state, but in the European Union alike.

Conclusion

No doubt, the list of those countries appearing reluctant to liberalize social services like education remains big. In the case of Greece, such reluctance is to a certain extent justified, taking into consideration the fact that the country has been engrained for a long period by the concept of state-protectionism, which sees the state as the sole provider of people's well-being and prosperity and also as guarantor of social justice and uniform equality among citizens (Stamoulas, 2006b).

Such conception, however, looks more and more unconventional with modern circumstances (i.e. the growth of the Knowledge and Information Society, the need to attach a more vital role to the efficiency of higher education systems, the impact of globalization, the increasing penetration of market factors in higher education, unprecedented economical and technological changes) that have brought about a sharp redefinition of consumer and market ethics at world level, namely the booming of private entrepreneurship and the growing liberalization of public services and sectors, such as the energy, social insurance, health and the education sector.

Hazards coming from actions of rogue suppliers or malicious provision of services that once were the responsibility of the state are reasonably potential and have basically two kinds of treatment: We can either issue a general and unconditional ban on the liberalization of public services, or we can subsume the act of liberalization under the process of a thorough and systematic regulative control in order to be sure about the quality of the produced outcomes.

In the case of private suppliers in higher education, this process should entail the enforcement of provisions concerning accreditation, academic standards, licensing requirements and also necessary improvements in academic and material infrastructure, should the quality level falls under a certain desired degree, for without adequate domestic regulation and enforcement, liberalization of education services could adversely impact on quality, standards, equity and prices.

The first choice, although appealing to traditionalists who opt for an endless chain of state prevalence in all fields of public life, runs the danger of maintaining states unable to ensure an adequate supply and an uninterrupted flow of quality social services to all citizens alike. This may have particularly negative effects on preserving social cohesion and a robust rate of economic growth. The second choice, on the other hand, might be most sensible and useful for a country who wishes to harvest the benefits of transferring in good faith some of the state's powers to private action and initiative, doing so under the laws of a solid regulatory order so as to ensure the maximum results of a healthy market competition and to safeguard people's interests as receivers of high class and uncompromised services.

Talking specifically about education, this is not to say that public tertiary institutions must be

treated with disdain or be deprived of their status and merit to society, but rather that they must be given the opportunity to upgrade infrastructure and facilities, regain competitiveness and redefine academic orientation and institutional management in order to keep up pace with the requirements laid down by a new economic and technological order. The desired purpose should be not the blessing of a private educational sector at the expense of its public counterpart, but rather the creation of an open, dynamic and easily adjustable to changes higher education system, wisely fused with the interconnection and the right proportions of public and private elements.

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