

Lifelong Learning in Greek Universities: policies, practices and prospects

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Introduction

Lifelong learning provision is a recent development in higher education in Greece. It is the result of wider national policies of educational reform in the context of socio-economic change. This article summarises the results of an empirical research project on lifelong learning (LLL) policies and curricula in Greek universities and points to lessons and prospects for its development. More specifically, we shall attempt to identify and analyse the extent and nature of LLL provision in four Greek universities and delve deeper into the problems and implications it may have for Greek universities at large. In this context, we shall examine the relationship between international and EU LLL policies and national and institutional policies and set them as a background for special types of curricula that have been introduced in the last five years or so.

The research is based on the hypothesis that the introduction of LLL at university level entails changes in the conception and structure of knowledge and a shift of emphasis from teaching to learning, i.e. from traditional, discipline-based knowledge to *domains*, which start with problems to be solved and then choose disciplines to tackle them. LLL provision in this sense is demand- rather than supply-led and focuses on the needs of the learner. This has direct implications for areas such as access, modes of delivery, quality assurance, and certification and accreditation. At the institutional level, LLL provision may also entail changes in organisation and certain shifts in power structures and power relations, as well as the establishment of partnerships with other academic institutions and non-academic bodies. In this context, the universities may become involved in market relations.

We shall provide a summary of findings and discussions in these areas and, since lifelong learning is an ambiguous and multifaceted concept and varies according to the educational system of each country, we shall also present a profile of the specific characteristics of the Greek higher education system.

The Methodological and Conceptual Framework

The meaning and implementation of LLL 'is open to selective interpretation' (OECD, 1996, p.89). The use of the term *lifelong learning* in Greece is very recent. In Europe, it was synonymous with *continuing education*, *adult education*, *recurrent*

education, permanent education, etc., which had various historical developments in different countries. Hence, there are many definitions of LLL.

There are, however, two basic components with regard to its application. The first concerns its emphasis on enhancing the learner's capacity 'to learn to learn'. This involves a process of conscious learning from childhood to retirement, with emphasis on creativity, responsiveness, initiative and the ability to handle and synthesise knowledge. This aspect relates to the four pillars of LLL referred to in the UNESCO report *Learning: the treasure within* (1996a, pp. 85–110), namely: 'learning to be', 'learning to know', 'learning to do', and 'learning to live together'. The second aspect is weighted towards a utilitarian dimension which involves the responsiveness of the individual to the changing needs of the labour market and his/her employability in the context of the 'knowledge' and 'information' society. Both these components are, in essence, complementary, although they could be in conflict, depending on the mode and context of implementation.

We had both these components in mind when applying the concept to our research and we adopted the following heuristic definition, which was also adopted by our partners in the broader EU project: '*those novel forms of teaching and learning that equip students (learners individuals) to encounter with competence and confidence the full range of working, learning and life experiences*'. For practical, methodological purposes it applies to: universal categories of students; lifetime learning; the shift in balance from teaching to learning; and emphasis on the learner rather than on the institutional provider. In this context, and in order to identify specific forms of provision and curricula that correspond to LLL beyond conventional undergraduate studies, we adopted four criteria, namely:

- new concepts of curriculum content
- new modes of delivery
- new access policies
- new accreditation and quality assurance procedures.

Not all criteria apply to all forms of LLL provision. But, for our methodological purposes, establishing to what extent some or all of these criteria apply to current practices is in itself a very significant finding.

We chose institutions, departments and centres of continuing education as our prime units of research. The choice of departments and programmes was guided by the criteria mentioned above and also by the principle of balance between groups of disciplines. For the choice of institutions, other factors such as size, age, and geographical area were also considered. The Hellenic Open University (HOU) was chosen as the institution which provides LLL *par excellence*.

The research focused on four of the 19 Greek universities: the *National Technical University* (Ethniko Metsovio Polytechnio (EMP)); the *University of Ioannina*; the *University of the Aegean*; and the *Hellenic Open University* (HOU). The EMP is the oldest, most important and prestigious technical university in the country and is a highly esteemed institution in Europe. It was established in 1836 in Athens and has faculties of engineering, architecture, metallurgy, physics and applied mathematics. It has 33 departments and a centre for continuing education 1,350 academic staff, and some 8,500 undergraduate and 1,500 postgraduate students. It awards both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The University of Ioannina, which was founded in the late 1960s, is situated in the North-Western part of the country. It has faculties of humanities, natural sciences, social

sciences, education and medicine, some 10,000 undergraduates, 800 postgraduates and 417 full-time academic staff. The University of the Aegean, spread on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Rhodes, was established in the 1980s and has faculties of social sciences, natural sciences, administration sciences and Mediterranean studies, as well as an institute of supplementary continuing education. It has 200 academic staff, 2,000 undergraduates and 520 postgraduates. The HOU started operating in 1997 and has faculties of social sciences, humanities, applied arts and natural sciences and technology. It now (2000–2001) has 6,000 students with a view to grow to 20,000 in the next five years.

The empirical material for the study included government documents, pamphlets and legislation on education and LLL; documents that profile the universities and the departments investigated; data on relevant curricula in each department and in-depth interviews with university officers and other academics. As the study is primarily qualitative, the main concern was to examine the response of the universities to the growing demand for LLL and identify the major problems in its implementation.

How far the findings of this research may apply to the rest of the universities in Greece raises important methodological problems. However, its validity does not rest on statistics, but on its qualitative character. Data were analysed at both the institutional and the system level. Although practices differ between institutions, the legal and regulative framework, the national policies and the pressures for reform affect the system as a whole. Applying Yin's (1984) concept of 'analytic generalisability', we linked data and findings at the institutional level to concepts, themes, and issues concerning the system of Greek universities at large.

The Characteristics of Higher Education in Greece

The universities in Greece are self-governed public legal entities which are responsible to the Ministry of Education, which supervises the legal and constitutional framework of their functioning and provides their funding. Until the mid-1960s there were only three universities and some schools of upper higher education but, responding to the rapidly growing demand over the last 30 years, there are now 19 universities, 14 Technological Educational Institutes (TEI) and various higher education schools. Here, we are only concerned with universities.

The growth in higher education provision has been inadequate to meet the very high demand of the last ten years. In 1997, there were 169,750 candidates, of whom 25,940 were admitted to universities and 25,660 to TEI. In addition, 54,099 went to study abroad (UNESCO, 1999). It is also estimated that between 40,000 and 50,000 students pursue higher education outside the official system at home in the *laboratories of free studies* (Kokosalakis, 1999, pp.127–130). For the year 2000–2001, however, the gap between supply and demand decreased significantly because of a new system of admission. Out of 136,315 applicants, 85,056 entered higher education institutions. There are no statistics as yet concerning demand for LLL, but it would seem that it is high and growing. There were 23,913 applications for 4,830 places at HOU in 1999. In short, there is very great pressure for places in higher education and more especially in the universities.

In theory, higher education institutions are self-governed, but in practice their legal framework leaves little room for innovation and initiative from within. All

administrative structures and full-time appointments must be approved by the Ministry, which is the almost exclusive paymaster of the universities. So their modernisation has been almost entirely dependent on the State. There is, therefore, no possibility to develop new independent strategies. This also applies to LLL.

Lifelong learning was not introduced in the Greek universities until the 1990s. Indeed, it was only after 1996, the Year of LLL adopted by the European Union, that efforts to open the system to non-conventional programmes started to gather momentum. This, however, was not a result of specific LLL policies and strategies, but of a wider education reform and an effort to meet the great demand for higher education by school-leavers. Another problem was that there was little consultation with the universities. The introduction of LLL programmes in the universities was almost entirely a top-down process. Reactions differed and were sometimes even hostile. The legal and regulative framework and a general picture of the implementation of LLL in Greek universities have already been presented in a previous issue of the journal (Kokosalakis, 2000). In the rest of this article, we shall focus on the presentation and analysis of policies and the impact and prospects of the curricula.

The Interaction of International, National and Institutional Policies

From the literature (Kokosalakis, 2000; Petrallias & Theotokas, 1998; Tippet, 1997) and our fieldwork, it became patently clear that LLL policies or strategies in Greek universities are inextricably linked to and, indeed, determined by various international and national policies. All respondents in the four institutions investigated were fully aware of this and seemed to take it for granted. On the whole, such policies seem to follow a top-down process, with international and more especially EU policies taken up and formalised by the State, and more particularly by the Department of Education. They are then implemented by the institutions. The higher education policy in Greece was both part of the wider economic and development policy of the 1990s and a response to OECD and EU educational policy. We found that most of the financing of university LLL programmes came from EU funds and that it motivated many institutions to become involved.

International organisations have emphasised the need for LLL (UNESCO, 1996, 1996a, 1997; OECD, 1996) and there has been substantial debate in major international conferences on the subject in the last five years. UNESCO proposed a universal, humanistic vision of education policy, which was intended to serve more as a source of inspiration than as a guide to practical action. It depicts the universities as crucial institutions in the learning society which, nevertheless, should be diversified and become the 'cross-roads of learning' throughout life. The Palermo Conference (1997) recommended: 'more institutional diversification, new policies of access to higher education, flexibility with regard to content, breadth, depth and duration of programmes, means of delivery, examination and validation'. Although this did not lead to concrete LLL policies, it has contributed significantly to the international discourse on the subject.

A more comprehensive strategy advocating *Lifelong Learning for All* was proposed by OECD (1996). For higher education institutions, it should lead to new policies and cooperation with other actors. The strategy also emphasised a

shift from teaching to learning and focused on the needs of the individual learner. But converting such strategies into national and institutional policies is not easy and there is a conflict and even a contradiction between the individuals' needs and the needs of society and the labour market. Clearly, how to apply international policy at the national and institutional level is a formidable problem. This was particularly obvious in our research.

In the international discourse on LLL, EU education policies have a direct bearing on the policies of the Member States. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 (article 126, ch. 3) specifies that the European Community will contribute to the promotion of new developments in education and encourage distance learning by assisting and complementing national policies in the context of subsidiarity. This strategy was strengthened by the adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution on 'Education and Training Policy' in 1993 and was elaborated in the Commission's white paper '*Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*' (1995). LLL policies within the EU and its Member States, however, gathered momentum after 1996, *the European Year for Lifelong Learning*, and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). An important policy document by the Commission entitled *Towards a Europe of Knowledge* (1997) stressed the importance of LLL. These developments were followed up by various conferences, workshops, etc, to formulate LLL policy at the national and institutional level.

Concerning Greece, the EU strategy, missions and policies on education and LLL had a decisive influence on the policies of the government. Using funds from the Community Support Framework Programmes (Koinotiko plaisio stirisixis (KPS)), the government financed the implementation of most of its LLL policies in higher education. Higher education reform and LLL became incorporated in the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Training (EPEAEK), which receives KPS funds. Within this framework, it produced legislation for the implementation of Programmes of Elective Studies (PSE); special postgraduate programmes; Centres of Vocational Education (KEK); and distance learning, especially with the creation of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). It should be stressed that the formulation of these policies by the government took place without any significant consultation with higher education institutions, although there were meetings between the Rectors and the Minister of Education. As a result, when the institutions and departments were presented with a *fait accompli*, especially concerning the PSE, many refused to implement them and the continuation of these programmes had to be abandoned.

Strictly speaking, there are no indigenous, independent LLL institutional strategies or policies in Greek universities. The institutions — or more accurately, the departments — can either apply or not apply to the Ministry of Education if they wish to launch these programmes, but they do not have policies of their own, although they may have their own views on the matter. This was the general appreciation of our interviewees. Obviously, attitudes differ between institutions, departments in the same institution, and individual academic staff. Indeed, the implementation of government policy largely depends on the attitudes of those who responded to the invitation to submit proposals to the Ministry of Education or to the appropriate programmes of the European Commission.

However, it emerged in our research that attitudes and traditions in institutions are important for the formation of an ethos, which is equivalent to a strategy. Decisive for this were certain enthusiastic individuals and groups and

networks of staff within and between departments. They were crucial for synergy and action. These were the people and groups who responded to developments, submitted competitive proposals and obtained the funds to set up new programmes, while fulfilling their scientific interests. Some members of staff defined such groups rather derogatorily as 'cliques'. Yet, in each of the four institutions we investigated, it was obvious that individuals and specific groups, as well as tradition and departmental or institutional profiles, were very important for the various LLL activities and strategies pertaining to each institution.

Summarising our findings, we can say that:

- The great majority of the members of staff are aware of international and EU LLL policies, although not all agree with the way the State handles and applies them. There has been some dissatisfaction and critique concerning specific national LLL programmes, such as PSE.
- There is not and there cannot be an explicit, autonomous, long term strategy for LLL at institutional level because of the complex centralised structure and relation between institutions and the State. In addition, institutions have no financial autonomy for policy-making and planning their curricula, although the Government seems to be studying this issue. Members of staff are aware of the need for institutional LLL policies, although people give a different meaning to the term. This cannot give rise to a coherent policy and an explicit strategy at grass roots level for the reason just stated and because of the way the universities function internally.

Administrative and decision-making organs cannot make long term comprehensive academic plans outside the governmental policy framework. In most cases, academic planning at departmental level is determined by the expertise available rather than by the type of educational provision needed by society. Thus, there is an *ad hoc* response to government or EU LLL policy which comes from certain small groups or individuals rather than an institutional or departmental strategy. Yet, there is a vague strategy which is characteristic of individual institutions and depends on various factors. Most important are the tradition and profile of each institution, the initiatives of its leadership and the educational philosophy and actions of certain members of staff.

Curricula and Changes in Knowledge

Forms of LLL Curricula

There are now four types of LLL curricula operating in Greek universities according to the definition and criteria of our methodology. They are: a) modular degree programmes in parallel to ordinary undergraduate studies; b) special postgraduate programmes financed by EPEAK; c) continuing education programmes; and d) the distance learning programmes of the Open University.

The first, called Programmes of Elective Studies (PSE), were established by the government to introduce LLL in the universities on a large scale. These, however, were not very successful. There was substantial opposition by staff and students. Initially, five universities responded to government legislation and admitted 2,051 students to PSE but the programme of the Technical University of

Crete had to be interrupted following a decision (2820/1999) of the highest administrative court. After the first year, the other universities also stopped admitting students to PSE. The government is now planning to operate LLL programmes in the universities and TEI in new administrative structures called Institutes of LLL, but legislation has not yet been enacted. Of the universities examined in the study those of Ioannina and the Aegean admitted students to PSE. The accounts of the academic staff involved were very positive.

All universities responded to legislation and established new postgraduate courses (113 Master and 2 Ph.D) after 1997. They cover technology (38); natural sciences (14); human sciences (21); economics (11); health sciences (15); pedagogical sciences (6) and agricultural sciences (10), are geared to employment and address graduates of various ages who wish to specialise or upgrade their knowledge and skills. The EMP offers 13 such programmes, the University of Ioannina 4 and the University of the Aegean 3.

Continuing education courses do not enjoy great prestige. *Centres of Vocational Training* (KEK), however, now exist in most universities. The EMP was a pioneer. It established a *Centre for Continuing Education* (1992) that mainly responded to the growing needs of engineers and is now offering some 200 small courses. The University of the Aegean has also established an *Institute of Continuing, Complementary Education* to train young scientists in new technologies and provide LLL courses in the areas of culture, economy and society.

The Open University is developing rapidly. In 2000–2001, it admitted 4,080 students out of 23,913 applicants. 1,440 enrolled in a postgraduate training certificate, 600 in a postgraduate diploma of specialisation, and 2,040 in a (first) degree. These courses cover a variety of subjects in technology, the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. In the last two years, 11 universities have also engaged in building infrastructures and producing material for distance learning.

Content and Changes in Knowledge

The content of LLL curricula we examined is variable, flexible and multifaceted. Some courses cover the same disciplines as conventional ones, but most are interdisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary. Some consist only in training, but most aim to combine both education and training. Indeed, this is a condition for their being funded by EPEAEK. There are, however, some courses which are very specialised. They tend to be quoted by critics of LLL programmes. The duration of LLL courses varies from a few months to four years, which gives them great flexibility. Their vocational content ranges from Ph.D degrees which address a particular practical, professional, or technological issue to training or refresher courses. The material is usually 'new' so as to keep abreast with changes in a given field. In addition, courses are designed with two principles in mind: changes in knowledge and the needs of the labour market. At the EMP, the HOU and the universities of the Aegean and Ioannina the needs of the local society are taken into account.

The relationship of 'disciplines' to LLL is a complex and as yet not clarified issue. The rectors and most members of staff were aware of the tension between traditional 'university education' and the need to invest in the 'new knowledge' which is being produced and very rapidly becoming obsolete. The problem for the

universities, as they saw it, is how they can be linked to the productive forces of society without losing their academic character. They were also aware that, in the information society, knowledge seems to become outdated more quickly in some disciplines than in others. This is clear in the applied side of the natural sciences, in medicine and in technology as compared to the humanities, for instance. Some stressed that the logic of LLL points to the need for substantial changes in the theoretical foundations, the structures and the relations between traditional disciplines. Many commented that the pressure to constantly restructure their courses would be eased if the theoretical foundations of undergraduate courses were restructured to reflect changes in knowledge and technology.

Access and Mode of Delivery

Because of the great demand for higher education in Greece, access to most LLL degree and postgraduate courses is competitive. Access procedures and required qualifications vary according to the type of LLL. In most cases, access is stipulated by legislation. The Open University, in theory, is open to all those who are over 23 years of age. In practice, it had to set a 23–44 age limit. Applicants should have a high school (Lyceum) certificate for first degree courses and a degree and possibly practical experience for entry into a postgraduate course. In the year 2000, most applicants met the formal criteria but the rate of access was approximately one in six. Selection therefore had to be on a competitive basis of qualifications and C.V. Access to non-degree certificate courses or thematic units is not competitive and almost all applicants with the formal qualifications are admitted. The situation is similar in ordinary universities. Access to PSE and most postgraduate courses is highly competitive, whereas access to KEK is almost free. This is due to the structure of demand and because small LLL courses still form a minor part of the university curricula.

The mode of delivery of LLL curricula is very different from that of conventional courses. The HOU, which provides the bulk of LLL courses in Greece, uses exclusively distance learning, with specially written text books. Personal contact between tutors and learners is limited. In the other universities, the use of new technologies in most LLL programmes is now standard.

Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Certification

The argument that LLL courses lack the required depth, rigour and systematic quality of university standards did not seem to hold for most of the curricula we examined. Quality assurance in conventional programmes in Greek universities has always been a problem because no clear mechanisms, applying to the whole system, were ever developed. In contrast, the legislation for LLL programmes stipulates the establishment of quality assurance committees. This applies to HOU, the PSE and the postgraduate programmes. For smaller continuing education courses, standards differ considerably. The centres of continuing education of the EMP and of the University of the Aegean both attempt to maintain standards. We did, however, hear complaints concerning the quality of courses in some KEK.

There is no problem for the accreditation, certification and recognition of the HOU or the PSE degree courses, which are equivalent to conventional degrees.

Training and continuing education courses provided by KEK are generally accredited by the National Centre of Certification of Structures of Continuing Education and Allied Services (EKEPIS). The certification of these courses is carried out by individual universities and departments.

Organisation and Power Structures

The introduction of LLL in Greek universities entails new forms of organisation and shows the need for a reform of traditional structures. The major problem seems to be how to create flexible and efficient units within rigid, complex, bureaucratic and legalistic frameworks. The organisation of HOU differs radically from that of conventional universities. It has a rector and vice-rector, the senate and four faculties with corresponding deans, but no departments. All its administrative and organisational units are still being constructed and cannot yet be evaluated. However, even with an embryonic organisation, it already shows great vitality and productivity.

LLL provision in conventional universities has already had an impact on their traditional structures. The PSE have been introduced in some universities as parallel units to departments, but most stopped admitting students after the first year. They are now under government review and it seems that they will be pioneering units for the creation of institutes of LLL. The postgraduate programmes with an LLL orientation are well absorbed in traditional departmental structures, but they entail the formation of small interdepartmental and/or interinstitutional units. The Centres for Continuing Education and the KEK are small units outside departments which can have full-time or temporary staff resources.

The impact of LLL on power structures and relations in universities, which have been changing since 1982, has been very limited so far. Apart from senates and rectorates, departmental assemblies are now the basic decision-making organs. New units, such as PSE, tend to create powerful parallel organisational structures. Although LLL provision is limited, large scale LLL provision would greatly affect the organisation and the existing power structures and relations in the universities.

Partnerships and Market Relations

The partnerships between Greek universities and the public or the private sector for teaching or research purposes are limited. For various historical but also ideological reasons the universities as public institutions have been reluctant to develop partnerships with outside agencies. Certain partnerships with other academic institutions at home and abroad have been operative for some time, but the key actors we interviewed saw it as necessary and inevitable that they should now be extended outside academia. Some saw LLL as a means to promote such partnerships through commissioned courses, for instance. The institutions we investigated had already established a very limited number and it is foreseen that they will increase soon.

Universities in Greece until very recently were funded exclusively by the State, but they are now also receiving external funds, especially through research. Of these, the EMP occupies a prominent place. LLL programmes are mainly financed by EU funds, but they are opening the way for the universities to enter

the world of market relations. This whole area, however, requires a strategy that works out who pays for what and how. Ways of involving and remunerating the academic staff must be found. This strategy does not exist in any institution.

Prospects and Conclusions

LLL provision in Greek universities is growing. However, its application entails various forms of curricula, which do not operate under that name. Potentially, there is room for it to be implemented even in undergraduate studies, but, so far, the major provider is the HOU. The attempt by the government to introduce PSE in the universities has been rather unsuccessful, but there are plans to create LLL institutes. Most universities have developed a significant number of postgraduate programmes which can form the nucleus for substantial high quality future provision. Provision of continuing and vocational education in the KEK in the universities is limited and does not enjoy great prestige. The KEK, however, may eventually become important providers for small courses if particular attention is given to quality.

In addition to economic and organisational factors, one of the major problems for the universities to develop LLL on a large scale is the fact that, due to the centralised system and their relationship with the State, they cannot develop independent policies or strategies. Therefore, any development in this as in most areas in higher education is bound to be tied to the policy of the State. In most cases, state policies are formed without consultation with the universities and without a good understanding and evaluation of the practical problems involved. This prevents the universities from engaging in long term planning. This also applies to LLL.

As in most European countries, the universities in Greece are in a state of flux and under severe pressure to respond to society and provide what, in Sweden and elsewhere, has been called 'the third obligation'. However, the response to the 'information' and 'knowledge society' and a shift from teaching to learning which that response implies for the universities has hardly begun. In any case, such a shift would entail a revolution for the universities and although most academics see the need for lifelong learning few seem to realise the magnitude of the challenge and changes that lie ahead.

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