

GREEK UNIVERSITIES AT A CROSS-ROAD: HOW CAN THEIR DECLINE BE REVERSED

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It has been widely admitted by everyone who has some knowledge about the Greek Universities that in the past few decades the quality of their output is in a continuous decline, no matter which index is used to measure such output. This observation is shared both by faculty and students alike, as well as by large sectors of the Greek society. In this paper we present a very brief review of the basic changes that were introduced in the Universities back in 1983, when the old system, a copy of the German Chair based system, was changed by a law written with the American University system in mind. The main changes introduced by that law included the abolishment of "Chairs", the introduction of the Departmental Divisions, the four grades of faculty members, the large representation of students in the electoral bodies for elections of the University officials (rectors, vice rectors, deans, Department Heads, Division and laboratory Heads) and the large percentage of students in the Department General Assembly, which governs the Department

Subsequently, the problems of today attributed to this law or to misapplication of the law or to other factors related to Greek society in general are presented and discussed, starting with the two main causes from which these problems originate: one political and the other associated with the university itself. The political or better partisan factor entered into university affairs through politically controlled student unions which designate the very high numbers of student representatives, not only to the electoral bodies for university officers but also to the administrative bodies, e.g. the Senate and the Departmental General assemblies. Consequences of this are: (a) Not to elect the best people in the various university posts, (b) The Committee responsible for temporarily "lifting the asylon" and for asking the police to intervene in case that criminal acts are committed in the University, is never formed since the student unions refrain from designating the student member to the Committee, (c) Blocking of important decisions like, e.g., establishing lists of prerequisites, abolishing the "automatic" student enrollment in any term without some minimum requirements etc. The second cause is associated with a non negligible number of university professors who favor the existing state of affairs and indirectly support or at least do not react when any minority decides to take over a university building or the whole university and close it, usually to protest about something. The same group strongly reacts not only to the creation of private universities in Greece but also to any proposal that would help exiting from the present crisis.

To reverse the decline it is proposed that a new law should include the following provisions:

1. The fundamental right of students to attend classes without any obstacle and of the professor to teach and do his research must be protected and secured by penalizing the taking over of university buildings by anyone. Persons violating this right, including University officers who do not carry out their duty to use ALL the provisions of the Law to secure this right, should be held accountable. This implies drastic reform of the existing "asylon" provisions.
2. Drastic reduction of the student representation in the electoral as well as the administrative bodies of the university.

3. Departments in which course prerequisites are not introduced should not be allowed to give degrees.
4. Establish firm requirements for a student to register in each Semester (e.g. minimum and maximum number of courses he is permitted to register for).
5. Establish rational procedures for course exams and conditions under which a student should not be allowed to continue his studies.
6. Establishment of new procedures for election of University officers (Rector and Vice Rectors) and Department Heads.
7. Grant greater authority to the Rector, Vice Rectors and to Department Heads for a number of academic matters, including disciplinary action in cases of violations of the Law or the University rules and code of ethics by students and faculty.
8. Restriction of the Senate role to strategic planning and to major issues only, by transferring administrative matters and pertinent decisions to the Rector and Vice Rectors. Do the same for the Department General Assemblies and delegate more authority to the Department Chairman and the Division Heads.
9. The Ministry of Education should grant greater autonomy to the Universities, reduce the bureaucracy and keep for itself only the role of oversight, for making sure that there are no violations of the Law by anyone.
10. Re-examination and possible revision of the criteria and procedures for election, promotion and granting of tenure to faculty members, giving as much emphasis to teaching as to research and publications. Establishment of periodic evaluation of all faculty members at every level.

Finally we conclude by outlining how the required changes can be implemented in a way that they will not be short lived, as it has often happened with similar attempts in the past.

KEYWORDS

University, Chair, Decline, Student participation, Administration, Rector, Department, Taking over by students, Accountability, Law revision, Required changes

1. BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

The Greek university system until 1982 was quite similar to the German system operating with the "Chair" as the basic unit of each Department. The Chair holder Professor had almost absolute power over everything associated with the "Chair", such as budget, activities, office spaces, laboratories, equipment, and, of course, over all personnel working in the "Chair", administrative, technical and scientific. This had few advantages and many more disadvantages, the two most important of which were the following: (a) If a problematic professor managed to be elected to the "Chair", then the consequences on the quality of education in the area covered by the Chair would last for decades, i.e. for the period till he retired. It was practically impossible to get rid of a "bad" professor. It is noted that since the election to a Chair was done by an electoral body consisting of all the Chair holders of the university, quite often this turned out to be a process controlled by favoritism and family connections rather than meritocracy. As a result, not only some excellent or even top people were left out of the university, in many cases totally worthless individuals were elected because their father, uncle or other relative had a Chair. (b) Since the Chair holder had tenure till his retirement and no incentives, whatsoever, to publish and thus follow the developments in his field, many of the old professors were teaching what they themselves were taught as students and any progress in their respective fields would not be filtered into the educational programs until the Chair holder professor retired and a younger, more informed individual was elected.

All this changed in 1982 when the new socialist government of Andreas Papandreu passed Law 1268/82 that abolished the Chair system and introduced a new framework for university education, modeled after the US system, but with few important differences. These differences had to do with the way University authorities i.e. Rector and Vice Rectors, Deans and Department Heads were elected, the unusually high percentage of student participation in electoral as well as governing bodies (like Senate or Department General Assembly), the nearly total absence of accountability at all levels, etc. Their consequences will be discussed below but here we will note that a number of deficiencies in that Law were the result of interventions by young university assistants with academic ambitions, who were placed in key governmental positions as very active members of the ruling socialist party. It is also worth noting that the "Chair" system was abolished by an earlier law in 1978, passed by a government of K. Karamanlis, but due to many reactions at that time the Law was never actually applied as Law of the land.

2. MAJOR CURRENT PROBLEMS

There is no doubt that the Chair abolishing Law of 1982, introduced some good changes such as the "opening" of the university to younger scientists, the introduction of incentives to do research and to publish and thus stay abreast of recent developments in one's field and the modernization, to a certain extent, of educational programs. However, it also created conditions of operation that led to many unacceptable practices and to a continuous decline of all higher education in Greece. An idea about some of the ill happenings in Greek universities and their causes is given in an article posted on a Greek site on the internet, where, in free English translation, we said:

"Has anyone wondered why in our country, plenty of totally irrational things happen, while the obvious actions and response become points of endless discussions and controversy?? What else other than incredible and totally irrational would one characterize the repetition over the last thirty years, of vandalism, arson and thefts of university property, under the eyes of the police, which however, will not enter into a university campus, unless invited by a University Committee that has never been formed? This unique provision in the Greek Law, known in Greece as University "Asylon" (a status granted to ancient Greek Temples , where any chased man, criminal or not, could seek protection from his pursuers who would be violating a sacred Law if they were to capture

him in the Temple). Has anyone wondered why in our universities we sometimes witness raw violence, such as the violent expulsion of Professors from their offices or classrooms, the taking over of university buildings by small groups of protesting students for days and even the "locking" of the whole Senate in their meeting halls, till they reverse a decision that some student groups did not like?? Is there any other university in the world in which as a consequence of the abnormally high student representation in the Department General Assembly, course prerequisites have never been established, leading to the automatic student enrollment from one semester to the next, without any requirement for successful completion of any single course from all the courses in any of the preceding years?. Among the many bad consequences of this practice is the extension of the time taken to get a university degree by perhaps 30%-50%, over and above the normal period, since the students who complete the number of semesters required for a degree, are allowed to participate in subsequent exams, as many times as it takes to pass any given course, without any time limitation. So it is not unusual to see students of 5-year engineering programs to get a degree in 7, 8, or even 10 and more years. Is there any other country in the world, in which university officials have been publicly complaining for vandalisms and destructions caused by partying students in university halls, although they are the ones who gave permission for such use, in spite of warnings by many that this was going to happen? Is there any other country in the world in which a historical university building has been put on fire twice by rioting mobs, and whose rector, who had decided not to call the police so that the "asylon" would not be "violated", was rewarded by a his reelection to the same position ? All these are signs and indications of a deep, long running crisis, in which Greek Universities were gradually pushed after 1982. They also explain the very low ranking of all Greek universities in various international evaluations."

Nearly all university officials, past and present, claim that the basic problem of the Greek universities is the lack of autonomy from the Ministry of Education. In our opinion this is only an excuse since most of the above described phenomena of decadence, could have been prevented if the officials were willing to face the challenge of applying the Law and not hesitate to "collide" with the small minorities of student extremists, who often get instructions from "centers" outside the university. Of course, no one denies that Greek Universities are burdened by the same terrible bureaucracy that plagues the Greek State. But this could never be an excuse or alibi for inaction and tolerance of criminal acts taking place in the universities.

In our opinion the decline of the Greek Universities is due to two basic causes: one political and the other associated with the university itself. The political factor is due to the partisan policies that entered into university affairs through politically controlled student unions that designate the high numbers of student representatives, not only to the electoral bodies for university officers but also to the administrative bodies, e.g. the Senate and the Departmental General assemblies. The main consequences of this are: (a) Not to elect the best people in the various university posts, (b) The Committee responsible for temporarily "lifting the asylon" and asking the police to intervene in case that criminal acts are committed in the University, is never formed since the student unions refrain from designating the student member to the Committee, (c) Blocking of important decisions like, e.g., establishing lists of prerequisites, abolishing the "automatic" student enrollment in any term without some minimum requirements etc. The second cause is associated with a non negligible number of university professors who favor the existing state of university affairs and indirectly support or at least do not react when any minority decides to take over a university building or the whole university and close it, usually to protest about something. The same group strongly reacts not only to the creation of private universities in Greece but also to any proposal that would help exiting from the present crisis.

3. REQUIRED REFORMS

The main points of the required reform to the existing legislative framework under which Greek Universities operate are known to everyone and there is complete agreement on these by everyone with experience from foreign universities and with a sincere desire to stop the current decline. They have been presented in the past and publicly discussed. Here we will only list them without many comments.

1. The fundamental right of students to attend classes without any obstacle and of the professor to teach and do his research must be protected and secured by penalizing the taking over of university buildings by anyone. Persons violating this right, including University officers who do not carry out their duty to use ALL the provisions of the Law to secure this right, should be held accountable. This implies drastic reform of the existing "asylum" provisions.

2. Drastic reduction of the student representation in the electoral as well as the administrative bodies of the university (e.g. from the 40% of the number of faculty members it is today to 5%).

3. Do not allow Departments to operate without establishing course prerequisites,

4. Establish firm requirements for a student to register in each Semester (e.g. minimum and maximum number of courses he is permitted to register for)

5. A course must be examined at the end of the semester it is taught and once more in the following September. If the student fails in September, he must register again for the course in the next Semester. In case he fails again in both periods, the student will be allowed to register once more for the course but he would have to pay tuition fees for the course. If he fails again in both periods, his enrollment is discontinued. The same will happen if he exceeds by 40% the regular time required for obtaining his/her degree.

6. Establishment of new procedures for election of University officers (Rector and Vice Rectors) and Department Heads.

7. Grant greater authority to the Rector, Vice Rectors and to Department Heads for a number of academic matters, including disciplinary action in cases of violations of the Law or the University rules and code of ethics by students and faculty.

8. Restriction of the Senate role to strategic planning and to major issues only, by transferring administrative matters and pertinent decisions to the Rector and Vice Rectors. Do the same for the Department General Assemblies and delegate more authority to the Department Chairman and the Division Heads.

9. The Ministry of Education should grant greater autonomy to the Universities, reduce the bureaucracy and keep for itself only the role of oversight, for making sure that there are no violations of the Law by anyone.

10. Re-examination and possible revision of the criteria and procedures for election, promotion and granting of tenure for faculty members, giving as much emphasis to teaching as to research and publications. Establishment of periodic evaluation of all faculty members in every level.

11. Course notes and example problems for each course should be available to the students posted on the internet

Details in implementing the above recommendations must of course be worked out, taking into consideration available experience from Greece and abroad.

4. HOW TO PROCEED

Having read the above problems plaguing the Greek Universities, the question comes naturally: "Why has this situation lasted so long? Why this long sought reform has not been implemented earlier?" The answer to this must be sought into the Greek political system and the populist conditions that prevailed in the country since the time the current Law has applied i.e. since 1982. In our opinion the main reasons are: (a) Populist policies greatly affected by vocal student minorities who were reacting strongly to any efforts of raising educational standards. (b) Reactions for reform by the university establishment described earlier. (c) Partisan reactions and disagreements to whatever the government by the ruling party would recommend. (d) Lack of continuity in the Greek set of Laws and rules under which the country operates. This is a general illness of the Greek state of affairs and is witnessed not only when the opposition gets the majority and forms a new government and then tends to replace many of the Laws voted by the previous parliamentary majority, but also when a reshuffling of the same Government occurs and a new Minister takes over. This sad sequence of events has been witnessed over and over during the past thirty years and the result is not only what we have just described above for the Greek Universities but also the near bankruptcy condition in which the whole country is nowadays.

We feel that if we would like to see a successful educational reform an agreement must be reached at the highest political level, i.e. between the Prime Minister and the chiefs of all parties represented in parliament. **The agreement must NOT be about what should be reformed but rather on how to draft the reform in all its details.** We feel that the government should try forming a high level Committee whose members should meet very high academic standards that the government will set. This committee does not need to have many members: a number between 7 and 12 could be sufficient. The government should ask each party in parliament to propose a number of members to this committee in proportion to its parliamentary power, with the non negotiable requirement that each of the proposed members meets the high academic standards set by the government. Then all parties must agree (a) that they will accept whatever that Committee will recommend and will vote it into Law and (b) that this Law will not be changed soon, except for possible minor improvements as a result of gained experience after it is applied. If this procedure could be followed, the risk will be minimized that when a new party gets to form a government it will try to change the Law. Another advantage of this procedure is the following: There is a belief among many that ideological differences between right and left wing parties, e.g. between Christian democrats and socialists, are such that the two sides would be unable to agree on the same educational framework because the different philosophies would permeate into the educational system. We do believe that no matter what ideological differences the members of the above suggested Committee may have, their high academic credentials and experience not only from Greek but from some of the best foreign universities, would be a guarantee that they will sincerely suggest what they believe is the best reform. It will certainly be much easier for them to reach a consensus on topics, on which different viewpoints will be presented, than between politicians of different parties who not only lack the required knowledge and experience but also feel as opponents in different teams.

At the time this is submitted, a new Law has been voted by the Greek parliament with the support of the two major political parties. It brings drastic reforms to the existing legal framework governing higher Education in Greece but has generated great reaction in the academic community. Most of the reaction comes (a) from the usual small groups of radical students who have always supported old fashioned leftist ideas and populist positions (b) from the rectors and vice rectors of All Universities, who are afraid that under the new Law, they would have little or no chance of ascending in the top positions they hold today, and (c) by the faculty members mentioned earlier, who react to any changes of the status quo for a number of reasons, e.g. the fact that under the current

system there is essentially no accountability for the way they fulfill their obligations, no performance evaluation, especially for the tenured faculty, and the loss of some other "privileges" that we will not discuss here. Irrespective of the fact that the new law includes some of what we have suggested above, it too suffers from the problem that it was drafted by a Committee for which the opposition and the other parties had no saying, although the major party in the opposition finally voted for it after some last minute changes it demanded to be made. The reaction to the Law still remains high, with some University administrations threatening not to apply it, based on the opinion of some legal advisers that some provisions of this law violate our Constitution. Unfortunately Greeks must still learn how to solve major problems of National importance by consensus and without creating major turmoil.