



European Lifelong Learning Educational Policy in the Light of the “Lisbon Agenda”: The Greek Case

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Abstract

Investment in human capital emerged as core priority for European Union (EU) policies at the Lisbon European Council of 23 and 24 March 2000, shifting the perspective as regards the correlation between economic and social capital, and providing for strategic goals in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion. Hence, novel priorities have emerged for Greek educational policy, accrediting exceptional significance to lifelong learning so as to raise compatibility with the “knowledge based society” mandates. The present paper attempts a policy impact analysis through thorough review of Greek education and training policies undertaken to respond to the European challenges. In the light of the evolving Lisbon agenda, it takes account of the legal context and underlying principles of Greek educational policy with respect to lifelong learning, to draw upon the impact of an EU convergence policy activating educational initiatives and objectives to attain sustainable growth development.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, European Union, Lisbon agenda, Greek educational policy

1. Introduction

Contemporary European societies lead under the impact of socioeconomic internationalization, digital technology advancement as well as demographic reallocation (Giddens 1990, Kumar 2005). Problems faced by the European Union (EU), such as competitiveness deficiency and unemployment rise, call for reforms able to reinforce economic effectiveness, promote excellence in knowledge and technology, and enhance social cohesion. Moreover, EU enlargement and emerging of new competitors (e.g. China and India) intensify the urgency for immediate action. In this context, lifelong education is considered *conditio sine qua non* for the attainment of EU objectives, through a functional approach of education for human resources development and unemployment compression (De la Fuente and Ciccone 2002, OECD 2003, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2002). Nevertheless, at the same time Lifelong Learning (LL) comprises a “platonic” dimension, expecting to facilitate European citizens’ access to institutions and participation in democracy, and strengthen social cohesion (Feinstein and Sabbates 2008, Longworth 2006, Murphy 2003, Pearce 2000, UNESCO 1976, Vandamme 2000).

Thus, investment in human capital emerged as core priority for EU policies at the Lisbon European Council, denoting the aim “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth” and providing for strategic goals to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion, referred to as the “Lisbon agenda” (European Council 2000).

The Lisbon agenda led to a common policy project, introducing a schema of enhanced collaboration in education and training among member states, committing them to a consistent strategy and concrete objectives, and accentuating the key role of adult education systems, so as to provide equal opportunities for all European citizens to participate in the “knowledge-led society”. By means of the “open method of coordination” greater convergence towards the main EU goals was enabled, promoting joint action through spreading best practice and setting guidelines and timetables for policy implementation (Ertl 2006, Longworth 2003). Even though, it is clearly stated that the Community “fully respects the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems”, a new era in community collaboration in educational matters has been initiated, leading to a “European area of education” (Hingel 2001) and practically overriding the principle of “subsidiarity” as stated in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992).

2. Aim of the study

The present study seeks to provide a policy impact analysis through thorough review of Greek education and training policies undertaken to respond to the European challenges. In the light of the evolving Lisbon agenda, it takes account of the legal context and underlying principles of Greek educational policy with respect to LL, to draw upon the impact of an EU convergence policy activating educational initiatives and objectives to attain sustainable growth development.

In detail, the current analysis sets out to trace causality among various evidence in order to conceptualize and interpret phenomena of rising interest, as well as implementation of bodies and institutions in the field of LL in Greece. To this end, a thorough study of EU legal documents and legal context in Greece was conducted, seeking to identify interrelations between EU objectives and benchmarks, in the context of a common policy scheme to reach the Lisbon goals, and action undertaken by the Greek government to meet EU mandates. Finally, an assessment of strengths and weaknesses of initiatives launched by the Greek state in the field of LL, was attempted, so as to enable suggestion formation.

3. The “Lisbon Impact” upon Greek Educational Policy

The objectives set by the Lisbon Agenda focus on two closely interrelated parameters to meet the demands of overall development and economic growth: a) restoring full employment and b) enhancing social cohesion. Nevertheless both of them are strongly conditioned by a third variable, accessibility to knowledge throughout lifespan and openness of educational systems prioritising thus, adult education.

On the grounds of the Lisbon Council Conclusions, the emphasis was placed on employment, setting the goals to raise employment rates, reduce the average level of unemployment and increase the number of women in employment by 2010 (European Council 2000). The Greek government responded by implementing “Regional Action Plans for Employment” (PSDA), (Law 2874/2000), according to which Regional Councils are enacted, responsible for drawing up the National Action Plan for Employment (ESDA) so as to attain alignment with specialized regional needs.

Following the mandate of the Lisbon Council to reflect on common objectives for educational systems in Europe, the Education Council drew a report in 2001, submitted to the European Council in Stockholm, which adopted the “Concrete Future Objectives of Education and Training Systems” (European Council 2001). The Council identified new areas for joint actions at European level, enacting the “open method of co-ordination” to be applied in the implementation process, planned to last throughout the period 2001-2010. The three main objectives decided on by the Council, comprising 13 sub-objectives, were:

- Increasing quality and effectiveness of education and training systems
- Facilitating access to all education and training systems
- Opening up Education and Training systems to the world

Legislative action in Greece to meet the afore mentioned objectives, was taken through Law 2909/2001 (art.3), which

enacted the renaming of the “General Secretariat of People’s Education” (GGLE) into “General Secretariat of Adult Education” (GGEE), a modification significant on both symbolic and practical levels, reflecting the endeavour of the Greek Ministry of Education to comply with EU priorities regarding adult participation in LL. The responsibilities of the updated Secretariat comprise the planning and coordination of all formal and non-formal adult education and training activities. GGEE supervises the operation of Second Chance Schools (SDE), Adult Education Centers (KEE), Parents’ Schools and Regional Committees for People’s Education (NELE). The same Law (2909/2001) redefined the role of the Institute for Continuing Education and Training (IDEKE), established by LAW2327/1995, prescribing as its prime aim the technical and scientific support of all GGEE programs. Within the next year, a Presidential Decree (PD.142/2002) was issued to further clarify the organization and operation of IDEKE. More specifically its aims were defined as: a) scientific and technical support of LL programs, b) spreading of ICTs in adult education, c) trainers’ ICT training, d) development of Distance Education, e) operation of European LL programs and f) development of educational material.

In Barcelona, in March 2002 the European Council endorsed the Work Programme “Education and Training 2010”, calling for European education and training to become a world quality reference by 2010. Moreover, it called for further action to introduce instruments to ensure the transparency of diplomas and qualifications (European Council 2002). A year later, the Council adopted five Reference Levels for European Average Performance in Education and Training (Benchmarks). More specifically, by 2010: a) an EU average rate of no more than 10 % early school leavers should be achieved, b) the total number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology should increase by at least 15 % while at the same time the level of gender imbalance should decrease, c) at least 85 % of 22 year olds should have completed upper secondary education, d) the percentage of low-achieving 15 years old in reading literacy should have decreased by at least 20% compared to the year 2000 and e) the EU level of participation in LL, should be at least 12;5% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group) (European Council 2003).

Greek institutional framework was further reformed by enacting National Committees for Employment and Social Protection, and initiating social dialogue, underlining the key-role of social partners in achieving wider acceptance of policies in order to raise employment rates and fight unemployment, both prerequisites for social cohesion enhancement (Law 3144/2003). Moreover, “Centres for the Promotion of Employment” were established, operating under the authority of OAED (Manpower Employment Organisation).

However, the first important legislative action to align with the “Lisbon agenda” was the implementation of an integrated legislative framework falling under the human resources development strategy. The establishment of the National System for Linking Vocational Education and Training with Employment (ESSEEKA) was enacted under Law 3191/2003, in the light of an integrated approach of education and training of manpower and its channeling to the labor market. ESSEEKA provides the framework for effective coordination of the systems of Initial and Continuing Vocational Training, the recording of needs of the labor market, performed by the Employment Observatory (PAEP), and the formation of vocational frameworks, which lead to the development of reliable initial and continuing training curricula.

Even though there had been important improvements in the field of LL, participation percentage of adult population was far below European rates (1;1% in 2002), making the benchmark of 12;5% by 2010, appear unattainable. Thus, immediate action in order to optimize participation in LL, was taken through the implementation of Adult Education Centers (KEE) in 2003. Totally, 58 KEEs had been founded by 2007, operating in all regions of the country and making possible for adult education to extend its action to any citizen, in every part of the country in need for educational services, thus providing adult population with equal chances to integrate or reintegrate in working and social life and cope with constant social and vocational changes (Panitsidou 2007).

In the light of the follow-up on the effective implementation of the detailed work programme 2010, a Joint Interim Report was endorsed in 2004. The Report called for enhanced collaboration among member states and coherent national LL strategies to develop flexible and effective education and training systems, pointing out the existence of deficits in some areas which have to be addressed if the common objectives are to be attained. Therefore, it urged for higher and more efficient investment in human resources, development of more effective partnerships between key actors, validation of prior learning and creation of learning environments that are open, attractive and accessible to everyone,

especially to disadvantaged groups (European Council 2004).

Identifying serious shortcomings and obvious delays in the progress made by member states towards the Lisbon goals, in March 2005 the European Council relaunched the Lisbon Strategy, refocusing on growth and employment and calling for urgent action on the basis competitiveness, productivity and social cohesion, placing the main emphasis on knowledge, innovation and optimization of human capital, “Europe's most important asset” (European Council 2005).

The Greek Government contributed to the revised Lisbon Strategy by submitting to the Committee a “National Reform Program for the period 2005-2008”. The objectives of the Greek National Program comprised employment reinforcement, rise of public expenses for education to 5% of the GDP by 2008 (a goal failed though, to be attained by the Greek Government), as well as undertaking of initiatives to improve flexibility, quality and effectiveness of the educational system (Greek Ministry of Economy, 2005). Nevertheless, it had not been but until 2005 that the Greek Ministry of Education implemented an integrated lifelong learning strategy in alignment with the Lisbon goals. Law 3369/2005 intended to establish an integrated legal framework for more efficient co-ordination and systemization of the Lifelong Education and Training actions and bodies. The reformed institutional framework attempts to cover all levels of lifelong education and training of the Public Sector, while it provides social partners with the potential to create LL bodies, targeting to increase active participation and strengthen social effectiveness. Furthermore, it makes provision for:

- distinction between Lifelong Education and Lifelong Training
- issues of providers of Lifelong Education and Training
- enacting of a collective body, named “National Committee for Lifelong Training”, to improve coordination of lifelong education and training services and interconnect them to ESSEKA bodies.
- formation of professional frameworks
- certification of qualifications and vocational skills
- funding and evaluation issues

In 2006 the European Parliament and Council jointly decided on the establishment of a programme for Community action in the field of lifelong learning, referred to as “the Lifelong Learning Programme”, aiming to foster interchange, cooperation and mobility between education and training systems within the Community so that they become a world quality reference (Official Journal of the European Union 2006: art. 5). To meet the mandates arising for the establishment of “the Lifelong Learning Programme”, the Greek parliament voted on the implementation of a National Coordination Body, under the name “Solon”, to provide for effective administration of all EU programmes on LL (Law 3577/2007: art.2).

Since 2006, Communications from the European Commission have taken special interest in “promoting efficiency” and “ensuring the quality of adult learning”, through “fostering a culture of quality of provision” (Commission of the European Communities 2006, 2007a, 2007b). To this end, “the quality of the staff involved in delivery”, is set out as a key factor. As outlined, “so far in many Member States little attention has been paid to the training (initial and continuing), the status and the payment of adult learning staff”, even though “the quality of staff is crucial in motivating adult learners to participate” (Commission of the European Communities 2007b: 9). To comply with these requirements, Greek Ministry of Education catered for the establishment of an Adult Educators’ Inventory (Law 3687/2008 art.10), judging this initiative important to facilitate provision assurance of overall quality in the delivery of adult education programs.

4. Conclusions

Looking into the data accounted above, there is apparent evidence of influence of EU guidelines on policy implementation, in Greek educational policy for LL. Rising interest followed by legislative action for the establishment of novel bodies and institutions in the field of LL, derived in alignment with EU convergence educational policy to meet objectives and benchmarks in adult education as prescribed by the Lisbon agenda.

However, the whole effort entails two contradictory outcomes. The positive aspect is that, during the period 2000-2008, Greece emphasised on LL and investment in human and social capitals in order to raise productivity and accelerate

development, as well as strengthen social cohesion. Thus, important legislative action was taken, concerning the update, development and quality improvement of the adult education system and its linking to employment. Moreover, social inclusion, accessibility to education, ICT skills improvement, as well as quality provision and assessment, became priorities for Greek educational policy in order to align with the Lisbon agenda mandates and promote adult education along with the establishment of a culture of LL.

Nevertheless, a qualitative study launched in 2007 in Adult Education Centers (KEE) (Panitsidou 2007), pointed to various controversies and lack of grounded planning in the policies endorsed by the Greek state. Moreover, extremely low percentage of participation of adult population in LL, far below EU levels (only 2;1% in 2007), denotes serious shortcomings and deficiencies in measures taken. This can be attributed to three core parameters. Firstly, absence of research in Greece, leads to undisputed adoption of EU policies and practices, prohibiting alignment with particular needs of the local market and society.

Secondly, the bureaucratic structure of the public sector restrains flexibility and inhibits development of quality services. An example of such an inflexible and of questionable value for quality provision, practice, is the implementation of a centrally controlled Adult Educators' Inventory (Law 3687/2008), based on qualifications and competences doubtful to ensure quality, while limiting the potential of the bodies and institutions to employ competent educators unless they are registered in the Inventory.

Finally, what appears to be the most important handicap for all initiatives taking place in Greek LL area, is financing. Most programs and bodies operate under mainly EU funds, a parameter that inhibits flexibility in operation and full alignment with local needs. Thus, there is an urgent need for rise in National funds invested in adult education (barely 4% of the GDP is spent on all levels of education), to increase quality in LL programs delivery and moreover, ensure continuance of their operation when European funding ceases.

Concluding, we deem important that further action and more effective measures are required in order to provide the entire population in Greece, with the chance to acquire or update knowledge and skills and raise participation percentage in LL to levels comparable with those of other member states. To make this possible, we suggest: a) rational allocation of EU funds, b) substantial evaluation of LL programs, c) research programs launched in the field of LL, d) flexibility of the institutional framework to adapt to the "knowledge-led society" mandates, e) partnerships promotion between businesses, social partners and education institutions at all levels, to promote alignment with specific needs, f) LL not limited to vocational training and education, as well as, g) rise in National funds invested in LL programs. It is high time the Greek authorities realized that investment in education is a crucial parameter to ensure sustainable development and social effectiveness, making available to all citizens a multitude of quality LL alternatives adapted to individual needs.

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