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Higher Education in Greece compared to Canada

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts higher education in Canada and Greece. An overview of the systems in place is followed by an analysis centred on the triad of funding, access and quality. Similarities and differences are highlighted, and the current challenges and issues faced by both nations will be examined, especially in terms of world competitiveness and the pressures of globalization. I conclude that Canada currently has postsecondary systems in place that make it more competitive in world markets than Greece has at the moment.

Introduction

Higher education in different nations around the world share some common characteristics, but also have differences unique to each setting. In this paper, Canadian higher education is compared to Greek higher education. There are a number of reasons why I chose this pairing to compare. First, from Aristotle's Lyceum and the origins of higher education as well as democracy, Western civilization has often attributed much to the influence of ancient Greek ideals. As higher education was a notion that existed in Greece thousands of years ago, it would be interesting to see how it has evolved into its current state. Secondly, and on a much more personal level, I am of Greek descent. I was born in Canada but moved to Greece as a child for a number of years, growing up among the ruins of ancient Athens. While there was always this awe-inspiring wonder of ancient times, the reality that I heard every day from relatives (especially those who were currently in university) was the difficulties they were encountering in obtaining a higher education. The high cost and low chances of being admitted to their program of choice, the inefficiencies of the system, and the dragging on of some degrees all seemed to point to a dysfunctional system. All of these anecdotal encounters piqued my interest to delve further into the topic and to learn more about the current state of higher education in Greece.

This paper compares and contrasts degree-granting institutions in Canada and Greece. In Canada, universities are the main degree granting institutions, though there are some colleges that are beginning to offer degree programs. In Canada, there are currently 97 universities (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, AUCC). For the purpose of this work, higher education in Canada will refer to the university sector.

In Greece, higher education that is degree granting is mainly comprised of universities and Technological Institutes (TEIs). Currently, there are 23 universities and 16 TEIs (Gouvias, 2012; Papadimitriou, 2011a). Both of these are degree granting, and in 2001 laws were passed that incorporated

TEIs into technological universities that are under the same constitutional provisions and administrations as universities (Gouvias, 2012). In this paper, higher education in Greece refers to all universities as well as TEIs, as they are considered equivalent to universities.

Canada and Greece have broad similarities in their higher education program structures. They both offer undergraduate programs that are 4 years in length, followed by masters/postgraduate degrees of 1-2 years, and finally doctorate degrees. Higher education institutions in both countries are mainly considered public and theoretically, they are also considered autonomous. I will further discuss the similarities and differences between the two countries by examining them under the higher education triad of funding, access and quality. I allude to the Canadian system but provide more information and expand more on the Greek system. It is important to note that Greece has undergone tremendous changes in the country as a whole in recent years due to the financial crisis; so, the majority of the discussion will be limited to the state of the higher education system until the year 2010. As the topics of funding, access and quality unfold, it will become clear that, while there are some similarities between Canadian and Greek higher education institutions, the Canadian system is better structured to respond and adapt to changing needs of financial pressures, increased enrolments, and quality assurance procedures.

Funding Higher Education

In Canada, funding of higher education in most of the country is provided by three sources of revenue: government funding, tuition fees, and other miscellaneous sources (donations, investments, etc.). The federal government gives funds to the provinces, which then allocate them to the respective institutions. The institutions then have some flexibility in allocating their funds to specific programs and initiatives they wish to pursue (Lang, 2001).

In Greece, universities and TEIs are financed solely by the state. As is outlined in the Greek Constitution (article 15), the state shall provide *Dorean Paedea* (free education for all) (Gouvias, 2012). This applies to all levels of education: elementary, secondary, and post-secondary. There are no tuition fees. All tuition fees, ancillary fees, and textbooks are provided free of charge to students. Furthermore, meals and dormitory costs are heavily subsidized so that they pose a minimal cost to students. Funding is determined by the state, through the Ministry of Education and is legislated at the national level (Gouvias, 2012; Katharaki, 2010), and therefore very different from Canada where provinces have jurisdiction over education. All employees of the universities, both faculty and non-academic staff, are considered civil servants, and their salaries are determined and are paid for by the government (Katharaki, 2010; Labrianidis, 2010). Hence it is the Ministry of Education that determines human resource policies, hiring, recruitment, pensions, and other staffing-related issues (Katharaki, 2010; Kokosalakis, 2001).

Budget decisions and spending are tightly controlled and audited by an independent mechanism that is under the umbrella of the Ministry of Justice (not the Ministry of Education) (Gouvias, 2012). As all funding decisions and budgets are determined by the state, it leaves very little room for

institutions to allocate their funding to different programs and initiatives. It limits what they can do with their available funds. This indirectly leads to a lack of financial autonomy (Gouvias, 2012; Labrianidis, 2010). Based on legislation that is in place, the state "...regulates all functions of Greek universities and acts as a straightjacket that prohibits any initiatives." (Labrianidis, 2010, p. 2015). This is in contrast to Canadian universities where, while a major source of the funds is from the provinces, institutions have the flexibility to allocate those funds toward their own programs and priorities (Lang, 2001). Greek universities are not able to reallocate their budgets internally, and hence cannot effectively differentiate themselves or steer towards their mission statement independently. This is summarized by Kokosalakis, when he states "...in theory, higher education institutions are self-governed, but in practice their legal framework leaves little room for innovation and initiative from within" (Kokosalakis, 2001, p 331). In reality, institutions do not even have a say in the number of students that they will admit, as this is also controlled by the Ministry of Education (Gouvias, 2012). This seriously hinders their autonomy.

Globally, there seem to be financial pressures that have limited government funding toward higher education. This is seen in both Canada and in Greece. In Canada, public funding for universities fell by about 20% in the 1990's (Lang, 2001). In Greece, total public funding of universities is not high and is well below the average of other European funding per student (Labrianidis, 2010). It is estimated that in the period 2000-2004, government funding per student fell by 21% in universities and 47% in TEIs (Gouvias, 2012). Most of the funds are budgeted toward teaching. While in both countries funding shortfalls affect institutions, in Canada at least there is the option of offsetting funding reductions by increasing tuition fees. In Greece this is not an option. This begs the question as to how these funding shortfalls are absorbed and if/how they affect the programs being offered.

When it comes to research, Canadian universities are funded by private donors as well as government initiatives. Government funding sources include the Tri-Council granting agencies, namely the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR). Other sources of government funding for university research include the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and the Canada Research Chairs program (Shanahan & Jones, 2007). The quality of the research being produced by Canadian universities is generally considered to be quite impactful globally.

While Greek universities in theory support and value research, the real picture is very different. Research is centred only in the institutions in very large cities and funding for it is very limited (Kyridis, 2012; Labrianidis, 2010). In 1995, Greek researchers published 304 scientific papers per million inhabitants, well below the European average and had a very low impact factor (Kyridis, 2012). At that time, the European Union introduced research support packages that Greece benefited from for funding research. Ten years later, in 2005, Greek researchers published 666 scientific papers per million inhabitants (more than double) and, while their impact factor improved, it was still the lowest among all European countries (Kyridis, 2012). Nevertheless, this shows that funding support from the

European Union improved research output in universities and begs the question of how much more it could be developed if more funds were available. More and more universities are trying to increase their sources of research funding by competing in European Union programs. Many universities are now operating a "Special Account for Research Grants" whose role is to maximize the attainment and use of research funds (Katharaki, 2010). There is also some flexibility in what projects these funds can be used for (Katharaki, 2010). This may imply that universities have a relatively small pool of funds to allocate towards their prioritized needs and projects. To respond to rising financial pressures of participating in research, there are debates as to whether to allow increased commercialization of research or to encourage private partnerships (Labrianidis, 2010). In Canada, there are a number of programs in place to partner research to commercialization and technology-transfer agreements. These are already well established and are helping Canada respond to global market changes, whereas it seems as though Greece is still a long way from this.

Funding formulas are used to allocate funds to each institution and are applied in some form/model to both Canada and Greece (Lang, 2005). In Greece, they take into account factors such as the number of students, teaching and administrative staff and the age of the institution (Katharaki, 2010; Gouvias, 2012). This also means that university performance (either successful or poor) plays no role in securing funding (Labrianidis, 2010). There are new developments being considered in the variables of funding formulas as initiated by the European Union. It is suggested that formulas still take into account the traditional variables mentioned above, but also take into account certain quality and performance indicators (Gouvias, 2012). These would take into account student retention, graduation levels, time of program completion by students, how much external research funding was secured, etc (Gouvias, 2012). These are movements that are being initiated by the European Union for a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that aims to bring some consistency in investments, standards, and guidelines of institutions within the member nations, and ensure that they are able to compete and meet the needs of the global economy (Gouvias, 2012). I will examine these further in the discussion of Quality in Higher Education later in this paper.

Access to Higher Education

Access to higher education in Canada is a widely studied topic and involves a number of factors such as socioeconomic status, family education, and geographic location. One of the most discussed factors is financial access, as universities in Canada charge tuition. While this is a factor in student enrolment, studies show that is not as significant as one may think (Lang, 2001), and there are a number of student financial assistance options available. In general, Canada is moving towards universal access to all.

Broadly speaking, access to higher education in Greece is theoretically open to all, as there are no tuition fees. Socially, all socio-economic strata and genders are eligible for entry into post-secondary institutions. There was a huge emphasis by the government, particularly from 1980 onwards, on rights for citizens' equality and reinforcement of free educational rights for all at the primary, secondary and tertiary/post-secondary level

(Kalerante, 2013).

The state is primarily responsible for planning, organizing and carrying out national examinations for entry into post-secondary institutions (Gerasimou, 2005; Katsikas, 2010; Gouvias, 2012; Katharaki, 2010). This involves a set of very competitive national exams covering specific courses, with the same questions across the nation. They are focused on four broad academic directions (Science, Humanities, Economics, and Informatics). When student results are released, the candidates then rank their school and program choices. Their admission to their institution/program of choice is based on their examination scores as well as their grades in the high school courses related to their academic direction of choice. The minimum entry scores to a program are determined by the Ministry of Education based on the spaces they are willing to fund. Essentially, the entrance grade to a program is determined by the score of the last entrant to that specific program (Gerasimou, 2005; Katsikas, 2010). The most popular, highly ranked, and hence academically competitive programs for admission are Engineering, Computer Science and Medicine. The universities in large urban centres such as Athens or Thessaloniki are also in very high demand (Gouvias, 2012). Interestingly, medicine, law, dentistry are direct-entry undergraduate programs in Greece, whereas they are considered second-entry level in Canada.

Supply and demand for higher education spots is a big issue in Greece. The government has tried to increase student spots but cannot keep up. From 1998 to 2006, ninety new academic programs were introduced (an increase of 24% of total academic programs) (Gouvias, 2012). In 2006, constitutional amendments were proposed to allow the establishment of private universities (Katsikas, 2010). Huge protests took place and the proposals were dropped. Another set of proposals that were eventually dropped in 2006 were in regards to new limitations on existing university students. Greece suffers from what has been described as having large populations of "eternal students" (Katsikas, 2010). That is, once students get in, they can stay as long as they want. Only about 30% of students actually finish in the recommended program time frame of four years (Katsikas, 2010). For many undergraduate degrees, student grades are pretty much only determined by their final exam mark. Many students, (up to 90% in some classes) show up on the first day, get their books, and then do not come back until the final exam date (Katsikas, 2010). They can come back year after year and write the same exam until they pass it. Numbers show that around 15% of university students are coming back to write exams 10-15 years after initial entry (Katsikas, 2010). They have moved on in other aspects of their lives, often having full time jobs, and come back to eventually get their degree. They are technically still considered students, and ultimately are taking up precious spots from candidates wishing to enrol in these programs.

One of the consequences of limited higher education spots in Greece is that a large proportion of students choose to leave the country and study abroad. It is estimated that during the period between 1998-2007, approximately 9% of Greek post-secondary students were studying in another country, well above the European Union average of about 2% (Labrianidis, 2010).

There are a few more challenges facing Greek students when it comes to access to higher education. One of the biggest ones is regional accessibility to post-secondary institutions. While Canada has geographic challenges to accessing higher education, there are some provisions to address this in terms of long-distance education or partnerships/transfer agreements between institutions to accommodate people in remote areas. In Greece, regional accessibility is a problem that has not been addressed effectively. While the country is geographically small, there are people that live in areas that are very mountainous or on one of the (many) islands in Greece. These areas generally do not have easy access to post-secondary education. A 2012 report from the National Education in Social Sciences and Education (NESSE) highlighted the huge disparities in Greece when it comes to this. Regional data on Greece show that, in areas where there are limited options for post-secondary education, less than 40% of all people aged 20-24 have graduated from a post-secondary institution, while in larger urban centres this number rises to more than 80% (NESSE, 2012).

Another challenge in accessing education in Greece is the limited (or non-existing) options for part-time study. In Canada, about 20% of students are enrolled in part-time studies (Lang, 2001). In Greece, those that need to work or have other life commitments are not easily able to access part-time programs. It is not really a concept there. Those that need part-time arrangements may simply enroll in full-time programs, but try to make it work around their lives and only show up for exams (Katsikas, 2010). It is not organized as a part-time timetable. This could potentially limit access to a large population that cannot commit to a full-time program. In Canada, most post-secondary institutions have options for part-time study, thus facilitating more opportunities for study.

While there is no cost associated with post-secondary education in Greece, once students are admitted, there is often a cost associated with preparing for the national entry examinations. There are numerous private tutorial/preparatory programs that run after school hours and are aimed at helping students succeed at the national examinations. They are attended by the majority of candidates; this phenomenon is also known as "shadow education" (NESSE, 2011). It is reported that over 80% of first year university students had attended private tutorial schools in 2000, and that number rose to virtually all by 2010 (NESSE, 2011). They are almost considered necessary in order to succeed on the entrance examinations, and most students do not even bother going to "regular" school in the last few months in order to focus their attention to exam preparation (Kalerante, 2013). They are relatively very expensive and families invest a lot of money into these preparatory programs (Kalerante, 2013). It is estimated that Greeks spent over 952 million Euros or, on average, almost 20% of each household's expenditure on these programs (NESSE, 2011). These preparatory programs are not necessarily to supplement material learned in school, but to help maximize its memorization (they are not tested much on actual application of the material), and provide sample exams, etc. (Kalerante, 2013). A comparative model in Canada may be the private preparatory programs that are in place for standardized examinations for professional programs such as the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) or the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), but these are generally not perceived as necessary preparation and many students that self-study can be successful in these.

All high school students are eligible for competing in the national entry examinations for free university education in Greece. It could be argued however, that based on the common place, expensive, preparatory tutorial system in place that in fact access to higher education is skewed to students that can financially afford to attend these tutorial schools. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may need to work outside school hours or simply cannot afford the equivalent of thousands of dollars per year in these private schools. The competition is so high for spots in popular university programs that they are at a tremendous disadvantage to students that have the extra tutorial preparation. In contrast, in Canada, if students do well in their high school courses then they have a good chance of getting in to their program of choice. Once in, they have to pay fees but may be eligible for financial assistance. In Greece, there is no financial assistance for these tutorial programs. So while both countries aim for universal access to higher education, free tuition in Greece is not the main determinant of access and there are more opportunities in Canada for student financial assistance if needed to access higher education.

Quality in Higher Education

In Canada, quality assurance of higher education is within the scope of each province. This is either through legislation or other policies and regulations. Some provinces (seven of them) have a stand-alone quality assurance agency that carries out this role (AUCC).

Historically there was not much in the way of quality assurance in Greece until changes began to be implemented by the European Union. It all started with the Bologna Declaration in 1999. In this process, 29 countries, including Greece, began to lay out changes within their higher education systems in order to increase cooperation and transferability between nations and to become more competitive in the global market (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). All countries were encouraged to develop quality assurance schemes, and the goal was to eventually form the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which eventually was formalized in 2010.

In Greece, there was no national quality performance monitoring system until 2006. If they wished, Greek institutions could voluntarily participate in the European University Association - Institutional Evaluation Program (EUA-IIEP). By 2006, only 8 of 21 eligible institutions had participated in the program (Papadimitriou, 2011b). Interestingly, all of them were outside of Athens. It could be perceived that these universities participated in order to further validate themselves in terms of their quality, whereas Athenian universities may be viewed as more prestigious (Papadimitriou, 2011b).

The Greek Parliament began discussions for forming a national quality assurance system and the Ministry of Education published some reports on their potential frameworks in 2003 and 2005 (Papadimitriou, 2011b). In 2005, the Greek Parliament set new guidelines for quality assurance. There were now legal requirements for institutions to implement quality indicators, and to undergo vigorous self-evaluations as well as external assessment procedures (Gouvias, 2012). These evaluations were carried out at both the departmental as well as the institutional level, and the findings were to

be published at the national level (Gouvias, 2012). They covered a wide range of criteria and attempted to be in line with the goals of the Bologna process (Gouvias, 2012). Those institutions that did not follow suit would face penalties, and it also put forth for the first time emphasis on quality and performance in consideration of future funding (Gouvias, 2012).

It should be noted that these new implementations of quality assurance requires institutions to have administrative support (in terms of data collecting, analysis, etc). Austerity measures in Greece in recent years have affected many jobs, particularly in administrative support. This makes institutions understaffed, making it very challenging to respond to the increased workload with a reduced staff, often resulting in not being able to fulfill their obligations on time.

In 2005, parliament also voted for law 3374 that established the "Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency" (HQAA) for higher education (Kotsifos, 2012). It became active law in 2007, and the HQAA website was officially launched in 2007 (Papadimitriou, 2011a). It is supposed to be formally independent of both the government and the higher education institutions (Gouvias, 2012). Another important piece of legislation was passed in 2006 that aimed to implement the European Credit Transfer System (Katsikas, 2010) in order to improve degree transfer between institutions, particularly in other areas of the European Union. In 2007 and 2008, a number of other laws were passed to try and improve several aspects of higher education, including more research initiatives, institutional autonomy and flexibility, and the quality of teaching outcomes (Katsikas, 2010). This is reflective of many initiatives and shifts in the Canadian system as well to better define teaching/learning outcomes and to increase degree transfer between institutions.

Conclusion

As the world has moved towards globalization, institutions must be able to evolve to changing needs in order to be more competitive in world markets. The World Economic Forum prepares a report annually on global competitiveness. One of the indicators for the competitiveness index is "Higher Education and Training," of which Canada ranked 16 out of 148 countries, whereas Greece ranked well below, at 41 out of 148 (Schwab, 2013). In this work, a number of factors were discussed that uncover the challenges that Greece faces in its higher education system that hinders its ability to compete globally.

While there are some general similarities between Canadian and Greek universities in terms of their public domains, funding by the state, and program structures, this work uncovered their many differences. In terms of funding, while both receive some funds by the state, in Canada institutions have the option of charging tuition and allocating their funds according to their priorities. In Greece, however, legislation restricts how universities can use their limited funds, resulting in a very static system that cannot evolve according to their needs. Both countries aim to have universal access to higher education but face limitations. Greece, however, has increasing limitations in terms of supply and demand of their higher education spots, and the preparatory cost to compete in the national exams can be even more prohibitive to some. Finally, both countries are working towards quality assurance frameworks that will maximize learning and increase

transferability between institutions. Overall, there are characteristics of the Canadian education system that make it more adept to flexibility and adaptability.

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