

## **European Higher Education Area (EHEA): The Greek case**

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper focuses on the issue of the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), currently underway in Europe, and its implementation in Greece.

It is obvious that the construction of EHEA is not an isolated process: it is linked to the construction of the European Research Area (ERA), the European Lifelong Learning Area (ELLA), and the institution of a single social area in the domain of education. It is related to the wider debate concerning the response of a unified Europe to the challenges posed by globalisation and internationalisation pressures and accommodates the political desire for the promotion of European cooperation. However, we shall not comment further on these issues. Our objectives are to:

- Report on the current objectives of the Bologna process
- Describe briefly the Greek Higher Education System (GHES) and investigate its level of compatibility with the objectives of Bologna
- Point to implementation problems and explain the reactions and the different collective strategic responses adopted by the two sectors of the GHES (universities and technological institutes) regarding Bologna. In our effort we employ concepts derived from neo- institutional theory.

### **2. The current objectives of the Bologna process**

It seems like an oxymoron, but the Bologna process begun in Sorbonne. In 1998, four of the most influential European countries, France, Germany, the UK and Italy, embarked on an attempt to create a common frame of reference to promote convergence of their higher education systems. The reasons for undertaking such an initiative and its objectives were incorporated in what is now known as the Sorbonne Declaration. It is quite intriguing, to note that the initiative of the “four” to sign the Sorbonne Declaration met with the opposition of other EU member-states who received it as an attempt to introduce a directorate.

In 1999, in response to the Sorbonne Declaration, 29 European Ministers of Education met in Bologna to discuss potential cooperation to promote **compatibility and comparability** of Higher Education systems. Their meeting resulted in the Bologna Declaration.

Since then, two more Communiqués have been issued, following respective meetings of the European Ministers of Education, in Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003). Meanwhile, the Bologna and follow-up process has received even wider support, since

participating countries increased from 29 in Bologna, to 33 in Prague and 40 in Berlin. The active participation of the European University Association (EUA) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) in the Bologna process has further legitimised this process. Since Prague, the EU fully participates in this process, as an independent member.

It appears that both initiatives – Sorbonne and Bologna - appear connected to the “hyper-activity” of the Commission regarding the European integration in the field of education in the after Maastricht period – a field that European nation-states are very sensitive to. Besides, the issue of confrontation between the European Council and the European Commission is an ongoing one.

The Bologna process, which is a European countries’ initiative with the full support of the EU has acquired further momentum after the meeting of the European Ministers of Education in Berlin (2003), while it will be further strengthened through the forthcoming meeting in Bergen (2005). The current objectives of the Bologna process, conducive to changes in the mode of organisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), can be summarized as follows:

- Adoption of a system based on three cycles,
- Development of mutually shared criteria and methodologies for quality assurance,
- Establishment of ECTS<sup>1</sup>, as a generalized basis for the national transfer and accumulation system and adoption of the Diploma Supplement,
- Promotion of lifelong learning at the Higher Education level,
- Recognition of prior learning.

### **3. The implementation of the Bologna process objectives in the GHES**

#### **3.1. Brief Description of the Greek Higher Education System**

The GHES traditionally comprised a university and a technological education (TEI) sector.

As a result of harmonization of Greek to EU legislation, directive 89/48 and the Bologna Declaration, TEIs were repositioned in the higher education system and were granted university status (Law 2916/2001). This means that they were granted the right to conduct research, to participate in postgraduate study programs as partners of (Greek or EU) universities and to confer master level postgraduate degrees<sup>2</sup>. They have been given time until 2008 to reorganize and submit new statutes.

In the case of Greece, it is important to distinguish between HEIs originating in the technological and the university higher education sectors, since differences in missions and historic traditions, status and mode of organisation of the institutions have led them to adopt different collective strategies to face the challenges of the Bologna Process.

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<sup>1</sup> The issues of promotion of mobility and of the European Dimension in Higher Education, which constitute additional objectives incorporated in the Berlin Communiqué, are approached through the establishment of the ECTS, since the latter facilitates the former.

<sup>2</sup> TEIs still do not offer third cycle programs and do not confer Doctoral degrees.

Until 2001 TEIs had a status lower to the status of universities, operated with different statutes and offered only three-year first cycle studies. The teaching staff of TEI was not required to possess a Doctoral Degree in order to be appointed and generally the academic qualifications of the presently appointed staff are lower to the qualifications of academics. The technical and vocational training orientation of TEIs, the lower qualification of TEI staff, their lower budgets and inferior infrastructure, can be seen as related to their limited legitimacy in society.

Most important, an intermediate government body (ITE) offers TEIs counselling on curriculum structure and content and on the development of policies to face the challenges posed by Europeanisation. Therefore it can be argued that TEIs are less autonomous institutions than universities. In this respect TEIs are very different from universities, which, within the framework of the law, set their own policies, on the basis of institutional autonomy.

The limited institutional power of TEI teaching staff, in comparison to academics, affects the degree of agency they exhibit, renders them amenable to government pressures for the implementation of policies and less able to resist policies promoted at the state level by the Ministry of Education.

The university sector operates under a common, legally set and sanctioned mode of organisation, which sets a definite and detailed framework for their function and leads to similarities the social structure of the universities. In the Roman law making tradition that prevails in Greece, the law provides a framework within which provisions are detailed to the point of direct application. In case the law is not specific enough, it is usual to request the appropriate authorities to define the specificities of meaning and the practices to be followed. The law accords power and authority to social actors, restraining their behaviour at the same time.

The line of decision-making in the university sector is based on administrative and executive bodies of academics and includes representatives of the other social actors, (students and administrative personnel). In this instance the law is exerting regulative (i.e. coercive) and occasionally normative<sup>3</sup> pressures, while the academics, on the basis of the regulative framework, try to make decisions with due respect to academic freedom.

In order to understand how power and authority is spread across levels in universities, one should note that decision-making is based on collective bodies of academics (with participation of low administrative personnel and students):

- The Senate, consisting of representatives of the entire academic community, is the highest administrative collective body of the University, setting the overall policies. The Senate is the competent authority to decide how state funding will be distributed across departments and to endorse and suggest to the Ministry of Education the institution of new departments. The Rector convenes the Senate, chairs its meetings and sets the agenda. The Rector's Council is the highest executive body. The central administration of the university also includes the Research Committee, the International or European Relations Committee and the Career's Office. Under the supervision of academics appointed as Heads of Committees, the central authorities of universities fulfil daily administrative tasks.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on how the law can be alternative interpreted as a coercive framework restraining action or as broad framework "for collective sense-making" see Suchman and Edelman, 1997; North, 1990; Pratt and Zeckhauser 1985.

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- Top managerial and administrative functions are performed only by high rank, tenured academics elected to the positions of President of the Department, Director of Postgraduate Studies Program, Dean of School, Rector or Vice-Rector. Practically, to be elected in such positions an academic needs the support of colleagues. Such a legislative framework facilitates the development of a “culture of equality” and of relationships based on a balance of power between academics and across departments. Even the Rector, the highest university authority, can be considered as “a first among equals” and is usually taking seriously into consideration the views of colleagues on critical issues.
- The General Assembly of the academics (G.A.) is the administrative authority of a department, deciding on issues related to the teaching activities of the department. The Administrative Council of the Department is the relevant executive body. Secretariats provide the academics with secretarial and low administrative support. The G.A. is the main locus of decision-making on issues related to reform/update of the curriculum, Within the framework of the collective decision-making by academics regarding curriculum, each academic pursues teaching on the basis of academic freedom regarding content.
- The G.A. decides on the composition of an electoral body of academics, which through an open process evaluates candidates for election, promotion through the academic ranks or in order to obtain tenure. On such occasions an academic’s involvement in (international) research activities as well as its teaching activities are evaluated. This form of peer group evaluation is presently the only institutionalised evaluation process in Greek universities, although some universities/departments have recently introduced processes of evaluation of courses by the students.

Universities’ research activities are highly decentralised, not restricted by top-down policies and depend on the initiatives of the academic. The Universities’ Research Committees, from own funds, support a small number of research projects and therefore exert only limited influence on the research options/choices of academics. Therefore academics support their research activities by international/state funds<sup>4</sup>.

### **3.2 GHES and the Bologna objectives**

The GHES is under pressure to implement the policies proposed through Bologna and follow up process. Currently the field of higher education is under normative pressure, emanating from both the national (i.e. the state/Ministry of Education) and the European level, conducive to structural changes. These normative

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the Greek higher education system and a more detailed discussion of national policies and responses to internationalisation see also Kontogiannopoulou-Polydorides G., Stamelos G. and Papadiamantaki, Y. (2004: 193-221)

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pressures have not crystallized into regulative pressures<sup>5</sup> in the sense that relative legislation has not been passed (as yet) and the debate is still open.

As normative pressures expressed at the national level can be seen:

- (a) the attempt to pass legislation concerning evaluation, quality assurance and lifelong learning institutes at higher education level.
- (b) the adoption of EU policies concerning ECTS/Diploma Supplement

To assess the compatibility of GHES to the objectives of the Bologna process we have constructed the following table.

<b>Bologna Process current objectives</b>	<b>GHES</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Adoption of a system based on three cycles	YES	A system based on three cycles already exists. Some difficulties are posed.
Development of mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance	NO	No system of evaluation. Voluntary evaluation projects by international organizations. Intense opposition
Establishment of ECTS and Adoption of Diploma Supplement	YES	Higher Education Institutions have committed themselves to implement the ECTS /Diploma Supplement. The process of implementation is underway. The degree of implementation varies
Promotion of lifelong learning at higher education level	YES	HEIs may operate Centres of Professional Training (KEK). The academic staff of HEIs may develop training programs co-funded by the State, the European Social Fund and/or the market
Recognition of prior learning	NO	No general system of recognition. However, there is a provision for recognition of prior knowledge in specific areas.

We may conclude that the GHES is compatible to the objectives of Bologna regarding the construction of EHEA, as modified in the Berlin Communiqué.

### 3.2.1. The issue of the three cycles:

Greek universities operate on a system of three cycles.

<sup>5</sup> In neo-institutional theory HEIs are influenced by three "institutional" pillars, which exert pressure and relate to changes in the social structure, the goals and the mode of organization. These are (a) the "regulative pillar", comprising the legislative framework and/or national regulations, (b) the "normative pillar" comprising norms and values and (c) the "cultural-cognitive" pillar. For a complete theoretical framework concerning the way institutional pillars influence organizational behaviour and the way organisations respond to regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures exerted by the institutions see Scott, 2001.

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The first cycle contains programs of 4, 5 or 6 years of studies (5 year studies in engineering or agriculture, 6 year studies in medicine).

Since 1992 postgraduate studies (leading to the equivalent of a Masters degree) were introduced in universities. Presently, the second cycle consists of master level postgraduate studies (1 or 2 academic years depending on the programme).

The third cycle corresponds to doctoral studies of at least 3 years. The first cycle degree is a precondition for access to the second cycle. A second cycle degree is not always a prerequisite for undertaking third cycle studies, but is desirable and is considered an asset of the candidate.

Therefore, HEIs currently follow a system of three cycles seen as broadly compatible to the Bologna requirements. However, universities (especially disciplines currently offering longer programs of study) could face some problems in the future, if a three year first cycle is generalised.

### 3.2.2. Quality assurance:

Greece does not have a national system of quality assurance for higher education. This does not mean that academics oppose the idea of evaluation. Many universities and TEIs have already participated, since 1994/1995, in quality assurance projects held by international organizations (EU<sup>6</sup>, OECD<sup>7</sup>, EUA<sup>8</sup>) and/or national programs financed by the EU and the state<sup>9</sup>.

However, a law-framework, proposed in 2002-2003 that would establish a national system of quality assurance, has provoked a heated debate among academics. The institution of an evaluation mechanism for quality assurance met with the strong opposition of universities and has not been passed by the Parliament due to a change in government in elections (March 2004).

The current government, has started a new debate with social actors in the domain of higher education (academics and policy makers), and aspires to achieve consensus on a quality assurance/evaluation system by April 2005. In any case, Greece should present at Bergen at least a draft-Law concerning the implementation of Bologna, or the integration of Greek HEIs in the EHEA is in risk of becoming problematic.

The reaction of academics to the proposed evaluation process is a point that requires some explanation and on this we shall focus on the fourth section of this paper.

### 3.2.3. ECTS and Diploma Supplement

Greek HEIs have already signed the Erasmus Charter. In this “institutional contract”, they have committed themselves to implement new ECTS. The process of implementation in each Department is currently underway but its progress is varied. We have to underline the fact that the institutional contracts are signed between

<sup>6</sup> 1 University Department and 1 TEI Department.

<sup>7</sup> 1 University and 1 TEI.

<sup>8</sup> 8 Universities.

<sup>9</sup> 4 Universities and 5 TEI plus 42 University Departments and 31 TEI Departments.

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Institutions and the EU, which means that the national governments are marginalized. However, there is actually a discussion about the necessity or not of a specific legislation act. It could be understood as another incident of the antagonism between national and European (union) agencies. The discussion about the adoption of Diploma Supplement is the same as the one about the establishment of new ECTS. So, the actual situation is exactly the same.

#### 3.2.4 Lifelong learning at Higher Education Level

The government and the academics have taken action regarding the issue of promotion of lifelong learning at higher education level long before the initiation of the Bologna process. In this vein, the GHES is fully compatible to the provisions related to the construction of EHEA.

Since 1992, following EU regulation 815/84 EEC, the government has provided the legal framework for the introduction of Centres of Professional Training (KEK) in GHES. Currently 13 Universities operate KEKs, which develop study programs addressing the unemployed. Since 1995, the government based on European Structural Funds funding, has funded Higher Education institutions to develop training programs. Accordingly, market forces may provide these institutions with further funding in order to develop in-service training programs.

In 2004 the passing through the Parliament of a Legislation Act, that would establish the Lifelong Learning Institutes within universities, was delayed and finally abandoned due to the change in government. The new government (2005), in view of Bergen, and in the context of the national debate on education, has reopened the issue of life long learning.

#### 3.2.5. Recognition of Prior Learning

An organised national system does not exist. However, there exists a provision for recognition of prior knowledge applying in certain cases, as the recognition of a foreign language or the knowledge of TIC.

### **4. Strategic Responses to Bologna.**

As it can be seen from the above, that the Bologna objectives have been generally accepted in Greece and reforms are currently underway. The main point of friction, which requires some explanation, is the objection of academics to an institutionalised evaluation process.

It is important to note that the two higher education sectors (universities and TEI) have adopted different strategic responses towards evaluation and quality assurance. To explain the different reactions, one must posit that although HEIs composing the GHES are organisations that are affected, even penetrated by their environments, they are also constituted as active players, not passive pawns. They are capable of responding creatively and strategically to influence attempts. By acting in concert with

other institutions facing similar pressures, they can sometimes counter, curb, circumvent or redefine the demands made upon them<sup>10</sup>.

According to information provided by the President of ITE (whom we interviewed), despite an initial heated debate and strikes organized by the professional association of the TEI's teaching staff, TEIs have accepted:

- The full implementation of ECTS as a credit system, setting the workload to 1500 credits and are ready to grand as of the academic year 2004-2005 the Diploma Supplement. The competent collective decision making bodies of TEIs have passed relevant decisions.
- Despite initial minor reservations staff members have accepted the evaluation/quality assurance processes proposed and have agreed to upgrade their qualifications
- Currently wide structural reorganization is underway across the whole sector (curriculum restructuring, inclusion of new courses)
- Promotion of joint Master's programs. Greek universities and TEI's have instituted nine joint programs, currently in operation. A large number of proposals, currently pending approval, have been submitted by TEIs for joint degrees with UK universities.

The developments within the University sector are more complicated: The law-framework for evaluation met with the stern opposition of the academics. POSDEP, the professional association of academic staff, which traditionally rallied only a small percentage of academics due to its extremely left wing political stance, acquired significance. POSDEP adopted a militant stance and in a highly emotional declaration requested the "absolute isolation of the Greek higher education from the Bologna process".<sup>11</sup> Through their collective action academics were successful in delaying legislation on a National Quality Assurance framework and to avoid, for the time being, regulative pressures<sup>12</sup> to conform to this point of Bologna.

From a neo-institutional theory perspective, the different strategic responses of HEIs can be seen as related to:

- The institutions immediate interests and the different values and norms<sup>13</sup> of academics, which diverge substantially from the interests of the Ministry of Education, attempting to impose a new regulative process on them.
- The variable legitimacy<sup>14</sup> these organisations enjoy in the Greek society

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<sup>10</sup> On the formation of collective strategies by organisations within a given organizational field (in this instance higher education) and the factors influencing such formations see Scott, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on the working conditions of Greek academics and the degradation of their working environment and professional status see Stamelos and Papadiamantaki, 2003.

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<sup>13</sup> In neo-institutional theory organisational action is related to the four building blocks of an organisation: social structure, technology, participants and goals. The relation between goals and interests and the way these may influence participants' action is extensively discussed by Scott, 2001

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of social legitimacy as a factor affecting the development of defiant behaviour in organisations, see: Scott, 2001

- A traditional lack of confidence in institutions controlled by the state, which is accentuated by the small size of the country and the academic community, which explains why half the universities have accepted evaluation by foreign internationally accepted evaluation agents, such as EUA (ex-CRE)

In this case the interests and intentions of the Ministry of Education, in alignment with the EU, were to promote the harmonization of a European higher education, whereas the allegiance of the academics can be seen as lying primarily with their institutions. Academics appear to oppose an evaluation process that is seen as diverging from the widely accepted values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy<sup>15</sup> and limiting their power to control what constitutes an academic program of studies and who is qualified as an academic.

The rationale for academics' objection to a quantified evaluation system is well summarized by one Associate Professor we interviewed and who stated: *"It seems reasonable to argue that a university or department should be evaluated on the basis of quality and enhanced research activity ...and that funds should be distributed according ...In my experience, academics in Britain, to ensure the survival of the department stopped doing research and concentrated their effort on the amelioration of indices, ... academics are smart people, they understand how formulas work...So as a first stage, one prefers writing articles over a book, as a good number of articles give the department more points than one good quality book, which takes more effort and longer time to produce...And it is then that the worse begins to happen ...self-censorship and the degradation of your work in your own eyes...You may avoid writing on subjects that interest you but for which "there is no market"... ... and I remember a colleague in Glasgow University rejoicing over acceptance of one of his articles in a renowned journal... when I asked about the topic he replied: "oh, crap...but who cares, the important thing is that they accepted it"... You see maximizing quality indicators and pursuing quality are two altogether different stories...although this is not obvious at first glance... I object to any system that would evaluate me using a formula on an excel spreadsheet."*

To conclude: the strategic response of the TEI sector to the normative pressures exerted by the state and the international environment can be seen as one of *acquiescence or conformity*. Such a response can be seen as motivated by hopes of additional resources (state funding) but mainly by anticipation of enhanced legitimacy, to be achieved through *structural isomorphism* with universities "to be achieved through a regulative mechanism (legal reform) that makes organisations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient"<sup>16</sup>.

Universities on the other hand, collectively opted for a strategy of *defiance*, i.e. they not only resisted institutional pressures to conform to an evaluation process but have done in a highly public manner. Such an organizational response can be explained on the basis of the already enhanced legitimacy enjoyed by the universities and its academics which allows them to act as "professionals, exercising their control over the state via cultural-cognitive and normative processes, constructing cognitive

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of values and goals as factors influencing action in organisations see March and Olsen, 1989:20-23

<sup>16</sup> The concept of structural isomorphism was introduced in institutional theory by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

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frameworks that define arenas within which they claim jurisdiction and seek to exercise control”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Scott, 2001:129