“Europe 2020” - Practical implications for the Greek Education and Training system: A qualitative study

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Abstract

In light of current and future challenges in the European Union (EU), there have been prescribed specific priorities for Education and Training Systems (ETS), to be attained by a set of European tools through flexible and quality assurance schemes. The purpose of the present study was to identify priorities for the Greek ETS, in line with a European convergence education policy in the context of “Europe 2020” strategy. A qualitative study was conducted with a sample of senior executives in Northern Greece, with the aim to explore their views on the practical implications of EU priorities for the Greek ETS. Data of the semi-structured interviews underwent a three-level qualitative analysis, identifying reform priorities for education and training in Greece. Moreover, findings highlighted that existing structures in the Greek context hamper implementation of substantial structural reforms. Practical implications of the study pertain to the distance need to be covered so as to harmonise with European mandates. However, only subjective suggestions of the interviewees were recorded, calling for further research in order to enable development of a comprehensive reform framework.

Keywords: Europe 2020, Greek education and training system, educational reforms, grounded theory;

1. “Europe 2020”: The challenges ahead

The end of the decade 2000-2009 found the European Union (EU) amid the worst economic crisis in decades, which has reinforced the strong interdependencies among member states and indicated closer cooperation as the only way out of recession. In particular, the implementation of the "Lisbon Strategy" during the decade 2000-2009, which aimed to build a “more competitive Europe with more and better jobs” (CEC, 2000), did not have the
expected effects on growth and employment (CEC, 2010).

In light of the poor results of the Lisbon Strategy and the ongoing economic crisis, the Council adopted a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training in May 2009 (OJEU, 2009). The new agenda, "Europe 2020", mainly focuses on "smart and inclusive growth", so as to build a smarter, greener and more competitive economy, with new jobs and lower levels of unemployment. It combines strategic long-term objectives with short-term priorities and is built on four pillars: a) lifelong learning and mobility, b) quality and efficiency of education and training, c) equity and social cohesion, and d) creativity and innovation (CEC, 2009; EC, 2010). As emphasized in the Bruges Communiqué (CEC, 2011):

Europe is trying to recover from a severe economic and financial crisis. Unemployment rates are high, in particular amongst young people. The crisis has emphasized the need to reform our economies and societies.

Europe wants to become smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive. To achieve this we need flexible, high quality education and training systems, which respond to the needs of today and tomorrow.

In this respect, the major challenges encompassed in building Europe of the future can be transcribed into specific priorities for Education and Training Systems (ETS) across EU. Yet, the central plank in the new decade is mainstreaming the use of a set of "European tools", the value of which was first outlined during 1992-1999, while their development was initiated in the previous decade (CEC, 1993; OJEU, 2006). The main "European tools" that have been developed are: a) the European (and National) Qualifications Framework, b) the Europass, c) the European Credit System for VET, d) the European Quality Assurance reference framework for Vocational VET and e) the European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations classification. Their development focuses on the “translation” of qualifications issued all over Europe, making acquired knowledge, skills and competences more transparent and comparable on the basis of “learning outcomes” (CEC, 2011). They practically form a “lingua franca” that facilitates communication not only between the labor market and education but also between education systems among member states (Panitsides, 2013). In this context, there has been prompted a transition of education systems to paradigmatic models based on learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) achieved not only through formal, but also non-formal and informal learning, while great emphasis has been put on quality assurance of educational interventions.

Taking therefore into account the escalating socio-economic and demographic challenges within the EU, associated with a rapidly aging population, a large number of low-qualified, high rates of youth unemployment and skills mismatches (Cedefop, 2012; CEC, 2008), strengthening cooperation among ETS in Europe and increasing transparency and mobility constitute the major structural challenges of the current decade, turning investment in education and training, under a “lifelong” perspective, into a “wonder drug”, a modern "panacea".

### 2. The Study

#### 2.1 Aim and methodology

The purpose of the present study was to identify priorities for the Greek ETS, in line with a European convergence education policy in the context of “Europe 2020” strategic framework. In particular, the research questions underpinning the study sought to: a) record the views of senior executives in education regarding the practical implications of EU priorities for the Greek ETS; b) explore preconceptions within the Greek ETS, impeding harmonization with European mandates; c) investigate the feasibility of reforms in the light of the current economic recession.

In an attempt to gain more meaningful insights into the situation (Verma & Mallick, 1999), the qualitative approach was followed. Qualitative data was retrieved through 13 in-depth interviews, conducted with senior executives. In detail, interviewees were Directors of Education Directorates in Northern Greece, as well as School Principals who had received the highest scores in the latest screening tests for becoming Directors of Education Directorates (table 1).

<table>
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<th>Demographic characteristics</th>
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<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Position</td>
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<td>08</td>
<td>61.5</td>
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<td>Grade</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
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All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, while they were carried out using a research tool constructed for the specific research, including open-ended questions requiring descriptive answers, to encourage conversation, which prompted spontaneous information. The data from the interviews underwent a three level qualitative analysis, following the “grounded theory” methodology, proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), comprising ‘open coding’, and ‘axial coding’ and ‘selective coding’. Initially, constant comparative analysis was used to develop descriptive codes, conceptualizing and categorizing the transcribed interview data. By comparing the codes (labels) that had emerged across interviews, ten categories were identified. At a second stage, by utilizing a coding paradigm involving, context, action/interaction strategies and consequences, an attempt was made to identify and define connections between categories and reach grounded conclusions. Finally, the core category was selected, systematically relating it to other categories, validating relationships and filling in categories that needed further refinement and development, so that recommendations could be formed.

2.2 Results

The ten categories that emerged through open coding pertain to: a) Flexible Curricula , b) Student-centered approach, c) Emphasis on key competences, d) Linking education to the labor market, e) Development of vocational education and training (VET), f) Financing & Stability, g) Establishing a “culture of evaluation”, h) Recruitment procedures, i) Decentralization & Flexibility and j) Continuous professional development.

In particular, regarding the transition to paradigmatic models that focus on learning outcomes, in line with the “Europe 2020” agenda, all respondents reported the necessity of introducing new curricula with emphasis on flexibility to adjust to particular requirements (social, local or personal). In detail, most interviewees argued for implementing curricula that foster the development of new key competences necessary for remaining functional in the “learning society”, with an accent on foreign languages and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Additionally, it was outlined that there should be put more emphasis on the use of learner-centered approaches, while there ought to be provided for flexibility to adjust teaching contents and objectives to local needs for enabling a smoother school-to-work transition. What was however outlined by all interviewees, as a central plank in any reform, is the impetus to surpass constrains put forth by the existing “exam-centered” approach. In this respect, most respondents highlighted the need for the development of attractive VET trajectories as an alternative career option, so as to counterbalance the congestion of students in Higher Education.

In implementing the foregoing reforms, interviewees reported that what can act as a catalyst is providing for greater flexibility at administrative and organizational level, by decentralizing responsibilities to schools, promoting transparency in recruitment of executive staff and ensuring stability of the teaching staff (which entails abolishment of current practices of transfers, secondments etc.). At the same time, there was made extensive reference to the necessity of establishing a culture of continuous professional development in the teaching staff, as an inherent parameter for quality assurance in the teaching practice. In this vein, all respondents argued for the primary importance of an evaluation plan, not for accountability purposes, but mainly as a developmental tool of continuous self-improvement. At this point, it was also noted that quality assurance is highly dependent on the stability (not to mention increase in) of the funds allocated to education, which however was considered by all interviewees rather unrealistic considering the pressures of the present economic recession.

At the stage of axial coding the data was reorganized, identifying causal relationships between the original categories. In this context, five axes emerged, which were considered of primary importance in achieving gradual convergence with EU priorities: a) promoting decentralization and school autonomy - as key parameter in combating bureaucracy and providing the necessary flexibility for schools to operate in line with the needs and characteristics of local communities; b) developing and implementing an evaluation plan – endorse a comprehensive framework of both internal and external evaluation, focusing however on formative evaluation, which may substantially impact on improvement of learning outcomes; c) introducing new curricula – with the aim to escape restrictions stemming from the existing “exam centered” approach, shifting the emphasis from grades and certificates onto learning outcomes achieved through the educational process; d) linking education to the labor market - while promoting the attractiveness of VET, so as to limit the number of Higher Education graduates, as well as provide for a skilled workforce; e) establishing a lifelong learning culture - both for the continuous professional development of the teaching staff as well as for students themselves.
Finally, in the context of selective coding, the impetus for implementation of decentralizing administrative schemata emerged as the core category, which found to be causally related to all subcategories having emerged through axial coding. In particular, the gradual decentralization of responsibilities and provision of greater autonomy to schools, with the central government retaining strategic planning, was considered to mediate in increasing flexibility at all levels and facilitating implementation of reforms. On the contrary, the existing administrative structure was reported to prevent any initiative and/or innovation at micro or macro - level, while it promotes a mechanistic inertia.

3. Discussion

The progress of educational reforms in Greece has been characterized by serious delays and shortcomings, as a large number of reform acts have either not been implemented or proven ineffective mainly due to fragmentation and lack of coordination. Since the political changeover until today (1974-2013) the average service of Ministers in the Ministry of Education hardly exceeds one and a half years, reflecting discontinuity of educational policy. Furthermore, in many cases EU funds absorption became an end in itself, undermining effectiveness of reforms and resulting into failure to link education and training with the modernization of society and economy (Panitsides, 2009).

Hence, the necessary reforms in alignment with “Europe 2020” strategic priorities, are neither easy to endorse nor to implement. They require a consistent approach to educational policy, while they involve disentanglement from the existing bureaucratic model. The findings of the present study, stressing on the need to strengthen school autonomy so as to enable greater flexibility and alignment to EU objectives, come in line with the administrative models described in studies both by the Commission (2013) and the OECD (2011). In particular, the prevailing trends in education systems in the EU (CEC, 2013) bear the following characteristics: a) decision making concerning staffing is usually made at school level; b) schools enjoy a great deal of autonomy in matters relating to teaching methods and materials; c) continuing professional development has gained importance over recent years, being considered a professional duty.

The bureaucratic entanglements of the Greek ETS and the consequent failure to adapt to international developments have been reflected in a number of OECD studies over time (OECD, 1995; 2011), pointing out that "the Greek ETS remains one of the most centralized education systems in Europe" and calling for immediate reforms. Even though it is back in the 1990s that the debate on abolishing bureaucratic organizational structures in schools and focusing on competitiveness, efficiency and effectiveness gradually began to dominate the educational systems of Western countries, in the Greek case centralizing and interventionism have survived up today, systematically inhibiting any effort towards modernization and linking of education to the labor market (Bouzakis, 1993).

However, the current prolonged economic crisis has reinforced the strong interdependencies in the EU and has indicated closer cooperation among member states as the only way out of recession (CEC, 2009). Even though the principle of subsidiarity is still in force, a “European area of education” has been steadily emerging (Ertl, 2006). The competitiveness of the European economy is highly dependent on the systematization of actions under the priorities of the" Europe 2020" agenda, setting concrete objectives and benchmarks for education systems in member states, while mainstreaming the use of a set of "European tools". It is therefore necessary for the Greek ETS to align with EU mandates, implementing reforms that may foster transition to flexible administrative structures, ensure quality of services and promote educational schemata based on learning outcomes.

4. Conclusion

In light of the global socio-economic challenges emerging, along with a convergence EU policy in education and training, launching reforms and ensuring their successful implementation is the only way for the Greek ETS to follow international developments and combat the prolonged recession (OECD, 2011). All the participants in the present study identified the need for immediate implementation of reforms. The main reform axes, having derived through qualitative analysis of the data, have set a framework of necessary and feasible reforms in the direction of tuning the Greek ETS to EU strategic priorities and turning education and training into a tool in tackling the challenges emerging from the present socioeconomic crisis. It should be noted however that the present study is limited in scope, as it recorded subjective views of respondents, while it was restricted to the area of Northern
Greece, calling for further research in order to reach grounded conclusions and come up with a comprehensive reform framework.

References


