

# Greek Higher Education: Another Patient of Austerity in the Operating Room

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Eurocrisis in the  
Press

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As the strike by the administrative staff of the Greek universities continues into its third month, Greek society is experiencing another drama that might end up having itself as the only victim. The latest stress-test for Greece stems, this time, from higher education.

More precisely, government plans to place 25% of the administrative staff of the Greek Universities into the labour mobility scheme triggered a series of protests mainly in the two largest universities in Greece; the University of Athens and the National Technical University of Athens. Under this joint initiative of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Administrative Reform, 1349 administrative employees from eight Universities will enter the mobility scheme, with 897 of them belonging to the aforementioned institutions of Athens. On the one hand, the Ministry of Education claims that the implementation of its well-designed plan will aid the Universities to operate effectively without the current excessive number of administrative staff. According to the government reform strategy, staff numbers have accumulated mainly through the bad habits of nepotism and clientelism that characterized the Greek state for the last 30 years. It is obvious that this plan, despite the Minister's denial, is in accordance with the targets that have been set by the troika for downsizing the Greek public sector. On the other hand, the majority of the Deans of these institutions publicly admitted that some departments will encounter problems in resuming their normal operations due to lack of administrative support if the Ministry's plan is finally implemented.



For example, under the new regime the Faculty of Informatics and Telecommunications at Athens University will end up without any administrative staff at all. Further concerns relate to the unhindered functioning of the University libraries, as the number of librarians will dramatically decrease. Both reasons lead to a tacit support for the strikes from the academic community – support that was mainly expressed through the failure of the Deans to condemn the strikes despite the clear danger for thousands of students of facing a disruption to their studies.

Greek society seems confused and divided about the latest developments in higher education. Most students are terrified about the possibility that the semester is in jeopardy, as the law requires at least thirteen weeks of teaching in order to authorize final examination and credits of completion. Time constraints at this point of the year render highly unlikely the chance to find a feasible solution that would save the semester. Such a development would add just another financial burden to all the Greek families that have students among their members. At the moment an online [petition](#) that seeks public support for reopening the Universities has attracted over 30,000 citizens, partly revealing public opinion on the issue.

However, policy making does not take place in a vacuum. It is important to take into account that any new bundle of measures dictating redundancies, especially without any strategic plan for preserving the public good at stake, exacerbates the widespread disappointment that prevails nowadays in Greek society. As a matter of fact, no trust exists that the services offered by these institutions will remain of a high standard. The devotees of this point of view see the danger, i.e. the possible degradation of the public good of higher education, *ante portas*.

The loss of the academic semester would be a moral defeat for the government as it would signal an inability to

impose the necessary reform dynamics that might transform the Greek state from a state-influenced economy to a liberal market economy according to the prescriptions of the troika. Nevertheless, even now, the Ministry seems optimistic that the universities will soon start operating normally again, and that the social dialogue about the future of the administrative staff will continue in the background on the basis of their platform. Such a development would alleviate the tension between the two parties and cause relief for the students.

All this seems to address the important question of how compatible a structural reform agenda can be with the austerity measures necessary for fiscal consolidation. Despite the existence of supporters who argue that both actions could be mutually complementary (the double dividend hypothesis), there is no evidence at the moment that Greek society is yielding such results.

The current reform agenda, without the necessary budgetary means, seems unable to deliver effective structural reforms that would secure high and steady growth rates in the near future. Cutting funds from higher education, without a solid plan for reconstructing the sector, will definitely have a negative impact on the human capital of the country in the long run. Moreover, taking into account the goals set by the Commission through the "Education and Training 2020" initiative, how an indebted Greece will be able to achieve the proposed benchmarks becomes really puzzling. It is worth mentioning here that there are problems with the number of the academic staff too as 402 academic posts are pending due to lack of funds by the government. In the author's view, the debt crisis should aid the EU to renounce the widespread illusion among its elite according to which European integration follows targets and norms that hold each other in check and balance.

In conclusion, the current reform plans in Greece, including the one for higher education, lack credibility. They seem to be dictated each time by the necessity to secure the next bailout installment from the lenders rather than a well-designed national plan for restructuring Greek society. Taking this into account, it will be interesting to follow closely the final act of the current developments in higher education. Hopefully, the patient (Greek universities) will survive the operation; otherwise, citizens will experience another deterioration of their living standards which will further sharpen the social inequality generated by implementing extemporaneous structural reforms.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*