

All the Wrong People are Applauding!

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by Professor Kevin Featherstone

The announcement from the Minister of Education, George Babiniotis, that the government is suspending the new law on the universities sends entirely the wrong signal on the programme of reform. The Minister says that the law will not be applied at present given the financial pressures across the education sector, following well-known difficulties in school provision. While the latter are very regrettable and a cause for concern about the policy planning process, the new announcement panders to those within the university sector that depend on inertia and have little regard for how universities might contribute to Greece's progress. Those engaged in violent protests and blockades – actions that have scarred practically every campus in Greece – can proclaim a victory.

All of this comes after earlier initiatives to reform the university sector had come to nought following protests. More particularly, it comes after the Greek Parliament passed the new university law on the basis of an unusually broad inter-party agreement. The political capital behind the law that had been accrued has thus been squandered.

The law had some imperfections. But the bigger picture here is the signal that the suspension gives on the wider reform process in Greece. On the test of who gains from this move: it is clear that all the wrong people are applauding – those against the deep structural reforms that Greece's future depends on. 'Politics is the art of the possible', of course, but in Greece this week the 'possible' just got smaller.

While it is true that the new university law is neither required by Greece's bailout terms nor would it contribute directly and soon to future growth, the law is emblematic – a test case of reform strength and credibility. Moreover, the new law should be seen as part of a programme to upgrade the quality of the university system, one that increasing numbers of Greeks before the crisis were abandoning for studies abroad and one that regularly scores poorly in international league tables comparing performance. The return to growth will be problematic for Greece and the contribution from R&D in select sectors could be significant. Such research has to take place in the universities (and research centres) that need a steady programme of long-term enhancement – with selective funding and incentives to promote the many good parts, circumventing the mediocre and the obstructionist. The new law had a painful gestation, but it got onto the statute books and the will to proceed was sustained.

The heat of the upcoming election campaign will not be conducive to maintaining the reform: in a tight contest, the allure of much-needed votes could see one or more party wash their hands of the law. Another short-term, hampered coalition government would be unlikely to want to touch it again. It will take considerable political courage to rescue this rare opportunity. Otherwise, an under-performing university system will have been left to decline again. And the impression will be given that there are still too many political taboo areas in Greece. If a third Greek bailout becomes necessary, Greece should think of the credibility losses it indulged in.

News of the Government's announcement can be obtained from:

<http://www.skai.gr/news/politics/article/199031/papadimos-babiniotis-tha-efarmostei-o-nomos/>