

'Pay as you learn'!

The 'Learning Society' Rhetoric in the EU-Sponsored Research Projects

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Introduction

In the last 7-8 years tens of millions of Euros from EU funding started to flow into the Greek educational system, under the umbrella of the 'Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training' (OPEIVT II). The OPEIVT II is one of the Third Community Support Framework's 24 Operational Programmes in Greece (2000-2006, with the prospect of extension up to 2008), and is co-financed by the 'European Social Fund' (ESF), the 'European Regional Development Fund' (ERDF) and other national resources. The Programme started as OPEIVT I during the implementation of the 'Second Community Support Framework' (1994-1999) and its main aim was the funding of development projects in the least developed –economically and technologically – regions of the European Union.

Through a discourse analysis of the official texts concerning the OPEIVT framework (Commission's Regulations and Directives) and a brief examination of the national progress reports, we will try to highlight certain issues arising within the given context:

- ✓ What is the hidden agenda behind the rhetoric on the 'Learning Society'?
- ✓ Is 'life-long learning' something clearly understood and agreed upon by every stake-holder in educational policy-making?
- ✓ What is the balance between 'supply' and 'demand' of ('life-long') learning opportunities?
- ✓ Who benefit and who do not from the implementation of the 'life-long learning' strategies?

The Official Picture

The total (projected) cost of the OPEIVT II for the examined period was estimated at €2,728.9 millions¹, with 75% of the funding coming from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European

Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and 25% from national resources. From June 2001 onwards, there have been published 236 calls for proposals regarding action plans for educational improvement (curricular change, text-book writing, production of e-material, introduction of new programs of vocational training and/or Higher Education studies, development of infrastructure, in-service training initiatives, etc.).

The main three aims, according to the official statements are:

- *Enhancement of the quality of education*
- *Prevention and remedy of social exclusion*
- *Formation of an integrated European educational area and quality employment*

These aims are further operationalised into specific projects and sub-projects. In accordance with the aforementioned guidelines, the specific measures applied to the Greek Higher Education have been, so far, the following:

- The partial financing of newly established Higher Education departments² (in Universities or Higher Technological Institutes) for a period of three years.
- The (partial) financing of enriching Higher Education with new or under-developed areas of studies (e.g. promotion of Gender, or Environmental Studies).
- The (partial) financing of new innovative ways of teaching in already established departments (e.g. the introduction of e-learning methods, or the enrichment of traditional teaching material with electronic resources, multimedia content, on-line feedback).
- The (partial) financing of technical infrastructure for the development of distance learning.
- The (partial) financing of postgraduate programs, in areas high on the agenda of the European Union (Business & Financial Studies, ICT Studies, Gender & Environmental Studies, Total Quality Management, Life-long & Distance Learning, Adult Education, Teacher Initial & In-service Training etc.).

EU Involvement in Education and the 'Knowledge Society'

The Ideological Basis

Under the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty (articles 126 and 127), the European Union (EU) (hitherto European Community) is officially assuming a more active role in educational policy making. At all levels and in every dimension, from primary school curricula to professional accreditation and vocational training structures, and from teachers' training and licensing to mutual recognition of higher degrees (Tsaousis, 1996; Stamelos & Vasilopoulos, 2004), the EU's significance in education policy-making is increasing.

As it is stated in the article 127 of European Community Treaty, '*the [European] Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States...*' (European Commission, 2003a). This provision should be combined with that in the article 123, where there is a special reference to the creation of the 'European Social Fund' (i.e. the main financial source of the ensuing OPEIVTs), which '*...shall aim to render the employment of workers easier..... and to facilitate their adaptation to industrial changes and to changes in production systems...*'. Thus, it becomes obvious that from 1992 onwards the notions of 'education', 'training' and 'labour-market' have been inextricably linked, since there is not a single action taken at European-Union level that has not, in one way or the other, stressed the economic character of the 'investment in education'.

The Rhetoric of the 'Common European Higher Education Area'

The so-called 'Common European Higher Education Area', the creation of which is one of the main aims of the OPEIVT programs³, refers to the role of Higher Education in the new century at European and international level. The main framework and aims of this 'Common European Higher Education Area' were laid out in the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations, and in the Prague Summit Conclusions (2001). The aims adopted, in the light of the member states' commitment towards the 'Lisbon Strategy'⁴, can be summarized as following:

- *More diversity than hitherto with respect to target groups;*
- *Establishment of an across-the-board 'culture of excellence' by concentrating on funding ...;*
- *More flexibility and openness to the labour*

- *Broadening access..... and more mobility.... ;*
- *Facilitation of the recognition of degrees;*
- *Strengthening human resources by promoting transparent and competitive procedures;*
- *Creation of a European framework for Higher Education qualifications and a network of quality assurance agencies.*
(Summary of Communication from the Commission of 20 April 2005).⁵

The Character of the Changes

As it is evident from the above texts, the main aim is the harmonisation of educational systems with the more general reforming measures promoted by the EU institutions. Beyond, however, the convergence that is reported in the texts and the official statements, two mechanisms appear to constitute the 'compasses' of the real convergence:

- Firstly, the importance given to the planning, the creation and the application of sets of *educational indicators* that should be used in the evaluation of various systems. The tendency that is obvious here—to remember Ball (1998)—is that, independently from the particularities of various systems—the rule according to which all will be judged is the final evaluation of 'products', something that also determines the scope and targets of the corresponding funding of education.
- The second tool of 'convergence' is *the globalisation of methods of management* used in the world of enterprises; that is, the transference of a certain managerial ethos, which corresponds to criteria of efficiency and evaluates system-outputs in terms of 'productivity gains'. The recent legal framework for the evaluation of programs funded by the EU Structural Funds outlines a strict and technocratic corpus of regulations (Regulation 1260/99 of the European Council, which was incorporated into the national legal framework in 2000)⁶. Great attention is given to the drawing of a realistic 'budget' for every project; that is, a budget that minutely describes where every single cent is going to. In other words, given the fact that the institutions involved are public, non-for-profit establishments, we are witnessing an increasing pressure for the introduction of criteria of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' into the public educational sphere, something that seemed unthinkable a few years ago.

The Rhetoric of the 'Knowledge Society'

The whole OPEIVT II value-framework is, among other things, a 'shrine' to post-modernism and the notion of 'knowledge' is used

and analysed exclusively through that theoretical and methodological standpoint.

According to post-modernists, the scientific rule *'as long as I can produce proof it is permissible to think that reality is the way I say it is'*, is being currently challenged by the rule *'(valuable) knowledge must be considered only what can be applied and measured according to predetermined performativity criteria'* (Lyotard, 1984, p.53). This creates a need for experts (that is, high and middle management executives, computer scientists, cyberneticists, linguists, mathematicians etc.), whom the educational institutions are called on to train. Outside the Universities, or institutions with a professional orientation, knowledge will *'no longer be transmitted en block, once and for all.... rather it will be served à la carte to adults... for the purpose of improving their skills and chances of promotion'* (p. 49).

This mentality is conspicuously present in every policy directive towards the reform of the 'system', not only at the highest, but also at its lowest echelons. As it is suggested in most of the official documents of the competent Greek and European authorities, lifelong learning is 'addressed' to individual learners and is inextricably linked to 'adaptability' and 'employability'. The main aim of the various EU Operational Programs (not only of the OPEIVT II) is to create: *'an integrated system which builds complementary links between education, vocational training, access to the labour market, lifelong learning and the continuous vocational improvement and professional development of the labour force'* (European Commission, 2003b, p. 2).

The basic objectives of this overall strategy of lifelong learning are (p.3):

- *The provision of basic knowledge and skills for all, at the level of basic school education ... so that the school acts as a foundation for lifelong learning.*
- *The modernization of university education ... through developing closer links between education and production and fostering entrepreneurship.*
- *.... The provision of a range of opportunities for young people, the encouragement of individualised learning ... and the promotion of high quality and flexibility in the training provided.*

In the definition of the lifelong learning strategic objectives, an invariably vague rhetoric of 'social partnership' is also emerging. The 'social partners' are called on to make an important contribution to the creation of new structures in cooperation with local government agencies. In this context, a new bill for *the National System of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment* was introduced (2004) by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour, to 'meet the new needs that have emerged due to the rapid development of education and training systems as well as the transformations in contemporary working settings' (European Commission, 2003b, p. 24). Within the provisions of the bill, a 'National Council of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment' was established, in which the Ministers and 'social partners' will participate. The Council is a body that can formulate and coordinate national policies, set quantitative and qualitative targets, regulations and principles monitor and evaluate procedures. According to the Guideline 15 ('Adaptability as an element in Lifelong Learning') of the 'National Action Plan for Employment' (MoE, 2003), among the initiatives taken by the 'social partners', is the '*Guidance and encouragement to [their] members ... to disseminate the concept and practice of lifelong learning*' (p. 5). In other words, and in stark contrast to past practices, when the Greek State was the main *designer* and *provider* of (officially accredited) training, now the representative of employers' associations are called on to contribute to setting up a framework of lifelong learning within the workplace context, on the promise that generous EU funding will come to supplement their efforts.

It must be stressed, however, that the bulk of the official documents stress the 'employability', 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' of the (rather vaguely defined) 'national workforce' (MoE, 2003; MNERA, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005). Very few references are made to what a former Commissioner for Education & Culture envisaged of the role of Education and Training (Reding, 'Preface' in CEDEFOP, 2001): that it is '*not merely necessary to sustain the employability of wage-earners and their ability to adapt to labour market requirements*', but a mechanism for the promotion of '*active citizenship and strengthening social cohesion*'. Furthermore, it seems that what is altogether abandoned is the original humanist concept of 'lifelong education' promoted by UNESCO in the 1970s, as propounded by the 'Faure report' (Borg and Mayo, 2005).

Issues of concern

Knowledge and 'Learning Society'?

'Knowledge' is considered – by the dominant discourse, that is — a major 'production factor' in a post-materialist, technologically advanced capitalist world. This misinterpretation masks the fact that, although modern economies are based not only on material resources and traditional industrial-production processes, but increasingly on abstract, non-manual, mental *labour*, the relations of production remain invariably what K. Marx had so vividly and analytically described back in the late 19th century: unequal and exploitative. Our small and dispersed 'knowledge societies' – and we are talking of course about the Western World, not acknowledging the contribution of cheap *manual labour* to our *knowledge-based economies*— depend, sometimes almost exclusively, on knowledge that is *produced, controlled, transmitted and manipulated* by large multinational corporations, which possess *monopolistic or oligopolistic* privileges in the world market(s). Thus, instead of giving opportunities for human emancipation, the new dominant discourse that perceives knowledge as something 'neutral' and 'objective' – which is 'somewhere out there' ready to 'be grasped' and utilised by isolated disempowered individuals— paints a rather illusory picture of the world and entails the danger of creating new forms of disempowerment, alienation and subordination (Stamatis, 2005, p. 119; for more theoretical elaboration see Kastells, 1996; Hill and Cole, 2001; Rikowski, 2002).

This is of course far from saying that all the existing forms of *moral, legal and political principles*, prevalent in most of the contemporary technologically and economically advanced societies (the so-called 'Western World'), simply 'reflect' or are invariably 'absorbed' by the technical and instrumental rationality of late capitalism; they are not merely an ideological-legitimation mechanism of capitalist production. The normative implications of certain of the above forms are indeed contradictory to the basic elements of capitalist reproduction (i.e. accumulation of capital, appropriation of surplus value, unequal weighting in the production sphere between owners of capital and direct producers etc.).

Nevertheless, as we are marching into the 21st century, it is surprising to see that the 'right to learning' is presented as an unalienable right, which *should be exercised* by each individual within the limits of a life-span, but with no guarantees of actually this happening, given certain restrictions and obstacles that deal

with personal, familial and wider socio-economic specificities. Everyone is *required* to participate in the 'Knowledge Society', since there is so much knowledge 'on offer', but no one has ever seriously believed that *all have the same opportunities*, and most of all, the *same desires and aspirations* for what is being offered.

A Homogenous 'Knowledge Society'?

What is prevalent in all the official documents that outline the OPEIVT II –and indeed the whole Community's legal framework—is the homogenisation of various social groups under such simplistic categories as 'women', 'unemployed', 'immigrants', 'handicapped persons' etc. Issues of class position, social stratification, occupational hierarchies, geographical, linguistic and cultural specificities, and, most of all, differentiated individual life histories and personal preferences are invariably ignored or understated.

For example, 'student mobility' is generally considered a good thing in promoting the 'common' Higher Education Area. But in terms of debate on the implications of the respective policy directives, it is almost absent. The fact that wide disparities do exist between various Higher Education institutions within EU countries – not to mention between countries – in terms of size, infrastructures, organizational regulations, administrative procedures and language popularity, is invariably glossed over.

One more example of oversimplification of classification criteria and neutralisation of certain 'groups' is the OPEIVT II 'action line' (*sic*) titled 'Improvement of women's access to the labour market'. Women are considered mainly as a 'homogenous' social group in risk of social exclusion, of under-representation in education, of subordination in family life and of constant discrimination in the labour market. One of the measures adopted, within the context of Higher Education is – as noted above – the introduction of Gender Studies programmes in the various Higher Education departments, or the enrichment of already established programmes with the (socially construed) 'gender' dimension'.⁷ The main line of argument can be summarized in the 'equal opportunities', or 'liberal-feminist' ideology, which stresses the individual rights aspects of gender inequalities (Arnot & Weiner, 1989; Blossfeld & Hakim, 1997; Hakim, 2000; Arnot, 2002). The Marxist-feminist approach, the radical-feminist approach and recent theoretical contributions towards a 'post-structuralist' re-evaluation and re-examination of the notions of 'gender', 'male' and 'female' remain untouchable in the discourse developed through the official language and target-setting of the OPEIVT II projects.⁸

A certain kind of digital 'determinism' is also characteristic of the guiding principles of almost all the OPEIVT II projects. It is exclusively stressed that the increasing potential of information and communication technology – especially of the Internet – has the power to widen access to information and enhance communication capacity, along with promoting social inclusion and facilitating democratic participation⁹. Although I am not an advocate of the 'digital divide' thesis – which argues that the Internet advantages privileged groups while further marginalizing disadvantaged social categories— at the same time I am opposing those optimistic predictions of authors such as Bell (1976), who '*saw new information technologies as paving the way for a more meritocratic and open society*', or Castells (1996), who argued that '*the formation of "networked societies" would lead to a proliferation of horizontally organized "communities of choice", rather than hierarchical relations of class and status*' (Willis and Stranter, 2006, p.44). The paternalistic rhetoric that urges (Greek) citizens to get acquainted with the use of ICTs, through heavily subsidized by the Greek State and the EU authorities training programs, seems to disregard the fact that possession of high income and occupational and educational resources gives access to additional information, which may further exacerbate existing social disparities and strengthen advantage. Even when a wide diffusion of a technology is emerging (a process often referred to as the 'trickle-down' effect), meaning that access eventually spreads to those who are disadvantaged, this is the result of commodification of technology and of globalised market competition, both of which are heavily situated within a certain socio-economic context, where 'allocative' and 'authoritative resources' (Giddens, 1984), in the form of capital – mainly 'economic', but also 'cultural' and 'social' – are unevenly distributed.

'Life-long learning' opportunities for whom? The 'demand' and 'supply' sides

It is widely proclaimed that promoting life-long learning opportunities, especially through the use of ICTs, is the only means of overcoming existing barriers to participation, particularly barriers of 'time, space and pace' (Edwards, Sieminski and Zeldin, 1993; Essom and Thomson 1999).

Thus, great significance is placed on the 'demand', rather than the 'supply' side of the equation. In other words, academic and policy-makers, who actually prepare the calls for proposals, seem to be in general agreement about who is currently excluded from

participation, and therefore who the policies of inclusion should be aimed at. The policies promoted through the OPEIVT II and other Community-funded programs (e.g. The 'Operational Program for the Information Society', 2000-2006), have tended to be concerned with removing the barriers that prevent these specific groups of the population from participating in learning.

First of all, it must be said, that despite the 'rosy' picture that official rhetoric wishes to sketch, research evidence, even in countries with a longer history of ICT use and no direct or indirect financial help from the European Structural Funds (e.g. in the UK), often suggests that work-based and ICT-based training has not increased, and may even have declined over the last decade. At the same time, some socio-economic inequalities in adult participation in education and training have worsened (Gorard and Selwyn, 1999a-b; Selwyn and Gorard, 1999; Williams, Selwyn and Gorard, 2000; Gorard, Selwyn and Rees, 2000). There are also *theoretical* and *ethical* issues that arise from the very essence of the discourse evolving around issues of knowledge expansion and/or enrichment, through the use of ICTs (supposedly one of the major levers of change, according to the policy-makers who administer the OPEIVT Programs).

Above all, this approach – even if we set aside problems of class position etc. – neglects another key barrier which also prevents people from engaging in learning, the dispositional (or motivational) barriers. If the problem is based upon people not wanting to participate then it is difficult to envisage how these supply-led schemes are going to be successful in terms of widening participation. If particular individuals are not well disposed towards the notion of 'learning' then removing other more tangible barriers such as cost and so on will have very limited effect (Gorard & Selwyn 1999a-b). As Dyer (1997) demonstrates, the 'disconnected' are characterised by their geographical location and low socio-economic status; with inner-city as well as rural areas least likely to have access to even basic telecommunications networks. Thus, in order to gain access to on-line learning, issues of space and locality suddenly take on a great importance.

As barriers of any kind are, by definition, more effective against the less motivated, it is not clear how merely making changes on the *supply* side will tackle this significant barrier. It can be strongly argued, therefore, that in order for these schemes to succeed, it is not enough to simply *supply* new and innovative learning opportunities, there must also be a *demand* for them. Rees *et al.* (2000) argue that decisions about whether or not to participate in post compulsory education tend to reflect 'deep-seated attitudes

towards learning in formal settings, such as educational institutions and work places' (p.11).

One more implication of the life-long learning rhetoric – which is at the top of the agenda, not only of the OPEIVT II funding, but also of the Greek government's recent legislation¹⁰— is the increasing cultivation of the idea of 'personal responsibility' for any future 'investment' that a person may wish to make in order to improve her/his negotiating power in a highly competitive labour market. In other words, the 'human capital' – as a revamped Marxian 'labour power'— is now the key-word, and it is the tool – the only tool, some might say – that a person can 'trade' in order to survive in a world of uncertainty and high risk (Beck, 1992).

Individuals – and not 'citizens' – are being seduced to 'invest' in their future well-being, by accumulating 'credits', 'learning units', 'training certificates', 'diplomas' and many other 'trading tools', which in turn will have to present to their prospective employers. 'Flexibility', 'adaptability' and 'openness to the labour market' in teaching/learning are the main driving forces in the quest – for the EU — to becoming '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*'¹¹.

As a result, and in line with traditional and modern neo-liberal principles, what the human capital approach of the OPEIVT II (and not only) is promoting is a solipsistic individualism, which rules out every prospect of social solidarity and collective action (Stamatis, 2005, pp.160-169).

Notes:

1. The data were taken from various statistical e-reports, downloaded from the Managing Authority's site, at: <http://www.epeaek.gr/epeaek/>.
2. According to the Greek legal framework for Higher Education, the 'department' is the basic academic unit, with its own economic, administrative and academic autonomy.
3. For example, as it is clearly stated in the Council Regulation 1260/99 (L 161, 26.06.1999), article 1, one of the three main aims of the Structural Funds and the Community Support Framework is: '*the modernisation of the various [national] educational, training and employment systems...*'.
4. Where the European Council (23 and 24 March 2000) set out the target – to be met by all member states — for the European Union of becoming '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the*

world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.'

5. Downloaded from 'EUROPA', the E.U. Portal, online at:
<http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11078.htm> [Date of access: 18.01.2006].
6. L. 2860/2000 (*Greek Governmental Gazette*, 251A'/14.11.2000).
7. See the various Framework Principles and Guidelines published by the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs (MNERA, 2001).
8. Despite the richness of content and theoretical approaches that are being developed in this kind of Higher Education programs (at under- or post-graduate level) by the academics and research staff (for a recent review of Women's studies across Europe, see the ATHENA report, 2001), the OPEIVIT II - 'Action Line 4' clearly sets as its main aim the (quantitative) '*increase of female employment, and the promotion of women's work in new working environments*', revealing a rather economic approach to gender inequalities in education and the labour market at large.
9. For more details see the OPEIVIT II Managing Authority's site, at:
<http://www.epeaek.gr/epeaek/en>.
10. In May 2005 a new Bill on Lifelong Learning was passed through the Greek Parliament. The new Law gives to every Higher Education Institute (University or Higher Technological Institute) the go-ahead for the establishment of Lifelong Learning. This will be developed in separate administrative units inside each Higher Education Institute, and will have a wide discretion over the necessary funding sources.
11. See the 'Lisbon Strategy', as described above.

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