

The Economic and Social Crisis in Greece: Fighting for a New Future

Students Against the "Athena Plan"

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Throughout March students all over Greece have been demonstrating and in some cases occupying their universities and colleges in protest at the coalition government's plans for restructuring higher education. Known as the Athena Plan, the proposals include the closing of some universities and the mergers or closure of many departments. Amongst the universities affected by these proposals is the University of the Aegean and its departments in Karlovassi, Samos where it has been proposed to merge the department of mathematics with statistics. This has provoked the students to occupy and take action and for the past few weeks they have effectively closed the university with only the department of computer science operating near normality.

On Friday 22nd March 2013, we went to meet with a group of the students involved in the action.

Not surprisingly the analysis of the students was far more informed than anything you can read in the mainstream media. From these sources you would think that the main issue of the students' concern and anger is the closure and merger of university departments and whole institutions. This is only one part of the story however.

Their anger at the closure and mergers is nonetheless real and important for as they told us the Athena Plan contrary to government assurances has nothing to do with improving the quality of Greek higher education but everything to do with cutting costs in line with the Troika's demands for solving the 'Greek' crisis. The government has provided no educational justification for its plans and indeed many mainstream commentators have argued that the plan has been poorly thought through and not logical. Much of what we heard from the students echoed the comments made by Nikos Xydakis in *Ekathimerini* (English edition, Feb 2 2013):

"Is there some lofty plan to boost the economy in the long run or a desire to elevate intellectual standards governing this reform, or is it solely about cost-cutting? Can the country's secondary educational system support these changes? What will the role of technical colleges be? What kind of productive model and what standard of formal education do we envision for Greece in the future? Is there a plan for the reformation of the agricultural economy, for industry and commerce, a plan for boosting the sciences and innovation? If so, how are these strategies being aligned with the reform of the education

system?

Unfortunately, we see no such strategy at play. Unfortunately, this reform, like so many others, is being dictated by nothing more than cost, the bottom line after horizontal cost-cutting measures. Sure, the cost of tertiary education to the state and the taxpayer must be reduced, but we should also calculate the cost of doing it in such a manner for the next generations.”

Where the government has provided any argument it has blamed the corrupt patronage system in which they are so deeply implicated by claiming that entire universities and departments were created at the whim of a local politicians and their favoured academics. Of course, we suspect that patronage of this sort can be detected in Greek higher education as it can be found in all aspects of the Greek state, but it is really hard to believe that this is the key factor. Furthermore, the actual locations of newly created universities and colleges are subject to many forms of political horse trading in many countries. This is not peculiar to Greece. After all the influx of students into an area has significant positive economic and social consequences. But the decisions and policy framework for funding new universities is quite a different matter.

In Greece, just as in much of the EU, the expansion of higher education was a policy priority for much of the past 2 decades. Across much of the political spectrum there was an agreement that it was a ‘good thing’ to have more institutions of higher education and a high percentage of each age cohort progressing to university. This we were told increases the ‘human capital’ of a society, which in turn is supposed to lead to economic prosperity. As a result the percentage of 18-21 year olds in higher education in Greece rose from 28% in 1996 to 60% in 2005 (*Ekathimerini* July 12th 2009). As the students asked us, are we now to ignore all these arguments from the recent past?

The students in Karlovassi were clear that the proposed merger of maths with statistics would worsen and not improve their situation and lead to less choice and the loss of certain important specialisms. But they also insisted that Athena was much more than this.

In particular, they see Athena as being a decisive step in the neo liberal transformation of Greek higher education. The Plan itself is based on research undertaken by a private educational company AKMI, for which the government paid 137,000 euros. This company stands to gain from the privatisation of education in Greece. It will be no surprise in the future, when bachelor level university education has been downgraded to more technocratic ‘certificate’ levels to see companies such as AKMI bidding to be the provider.

We were told that governments have for some years been attempting to make changes to Greek higher education. In particular they have been trying to reduce the level of student and staff involvement in the management of universities and to replace them with a business oriented management system. The Athena Plan both endorses and seeks to implement fully the laws passed in 2011 (Law 4009) and 2012 (law 4076) which were ‘postponed’ due to a wave of protests, occupations and collective disobedience. It appears to be banking on the severity of the crisis to push through what it has otherwise failed to achieve. Some parts of these Laws have been implemented.

As the Karlovassi students told us, for the first time all student are being asked to contribute to the costs of their food which had been free in the past. Now they are expected to pay 3

euros a day which as they note is a small sum but the principal of free provision has now been broken and they expect that the cost will increase year on year. Next academic year the free provision of books to students is to be removed and the costs transferred to students. And Athena is proposing that students will need to contribute to the costs of tuition. As one of the students told us, “we and our families have paid through our taxes to create an open free university system, now this is being taken away”.

In the process of trying to ‘reform’ higher education, the minister of education has been given formidable powers to make changes in both the quantity and detail of higher education without having to seek full parliamentary approval. These powers are profoundly anti-democratic.

The Karlovassi students see the same anti-democratic impulses at work in the government’s insistence that the role of students and staff in the governance of universities be reduced. They are particularly fearful of the consequences of involving businesses in the management of universities: businesses which in many cases are deeply implicated in the crisis and responsible for the incredible rate of youth unemployment (65%) and the 50% cut in household incomes.

They foresee a future in which both the amount of provision and the content of the curriculum will be determined by the needs of business and the labour market and not by the needs and priorities of the people and society more generally. It can be anticipated with some confidence, that increasing the role of business will see a weakening of provision in the social sciences and humanities which the corporate world tend to view with suspicion as being anti-corporate. Under the current Athena plans, the large social work school in the Patras TIE is slated to close as well as the only social work course in a University.

The Occupation

Although some of the activists we met looked tired, there was no denying their determination to fight Athena. They told us that generally morale amongst the student body as a whole is high. In no small degree their morale was boosted by the fact that the government has been forced to delay the implementation of Athena. The students also reported that they are being well supported by the teaching staff. With no teaching except in Computer Science, the students are facing the prospect of lost time as end of semester assessments can not take place if there has been no teaching. Although it is not clear if this will happen as the teaching staff are promising to explore ways in which students can progress despite the occupations.

In order to sustain morale they have held parties, concerts, film nights and so on although there has not been as yet the development of an alternative set of classes to discuss the broader political context. Those students we met were clear that Athena is about transforming Greek higher education in ways which will favour only those with sufficient income and will seek to transform universities into institutions whose prime purpose is to meet the needs of the corporate sector. Education in the true sense of the word will be destroyed. And free higher education as a right for all young Greeks will be eradicated. Whilst there was much we admired in the students’ understanding of their situation we did feel that they could be doing more during the weeks of occupation to deepen their understanding and to broaden their struggle with others on Samos. But maybe our criticism is not entirely justified as the students see the struggle against the government’s plans is going to be a long one with the current action only be one stage in the ‘war’. They were well

aware that the occupation could not last for much longer and were already discussing the next steps which, they said, needed to include the development of another, alternative vision of universities. A vision which would be based on universities contributing to the social, and human needs of the whole society and not just the narrow interests of business.

Working against them is the practical issue that many students come from already hard pressed families who are making considerable sacrifices to keep their children in university. Hence the occupation and closing down the university was delaying their progress and placing their families under additional pressures. We were told that increasing numbers of their friends were leaving the island because they and their families could no longer afford the costs. As there is no obligation of students to attend classes those leaving were intending to continue their studies, alone and at home but as they acknowledged this is not easy.

We fully support the students' actions and proposals. The damage arising from these neo-liberal policies for universities is already clear in the societies where they are being implemented. In Britain for example, where students are now being charged up to £9,000 per year for tuition means that on completion many students are burdened with debts of up to £60,000. Debts of this magnitude mean that poorer working class students are not going to go on to university. The risk is just too great. It also means that employability rather than education increasingly determines students' choices of courses. With this kind of debt burden it is hardly surprising that the first concern of a student is going to be what sort of job they can expect and to choose subjects which seem to guarantee a decent income rather than studying something because that is your passion or interest. This is already apparent here and we were told by some of the students in Karlovassi that up to 80% of students in their opinion, were taking subjects in which they had no interest. Their choices were informed primarily by what course they thought would give them a chance of a decent job on graduation. This is tragic both for the student and the wider society and constitutes an incredible waste and destruction of talent.

In a relatively small population such as Greece's it has even further consequences. The crisis has led to a youth unemployment rate of over 60%. The government, in an attempt to alleviate this problem has determined that the wages for young people between 21 and 26 should be no higher than 400 euros a month, irrespective of talent and qualifications. This is the salary the students we met expected on graduation. No wonder then, that many students were seeing their course as a route not to a job in Greece but outside the country. Over half of those we met expected to leave the country, not because they wanted to, but because they saw no other possibility. Four days after our discussion, *Ekathimerini* reported on recent research undertaken at the University of Macedonia (in Thessaloniki) that discovered that "more than 150,000 Greek graduates are estimated to have moved to more than 70 countries in the past five years in order to find work....According to data drawn from a recent study by economic geography professor Lois Lambrianidis, the majority of those graduates are pursuing careers in Britain, Germany, France and the United States....Lambrianidis said that 61 percent of expat graduates did not even apply for a job in Greece after completing their studies here or abroad (*Ekathimerini*, March 27, 2013).

The Athena Plan will do nothing to stop this bleeding of young talent from a country which desperately needs these young people if it is to recover from the ongoing humanitarian crisis. It will do nothing to meet the urgent need of a society which needs critical and creative thinking if it is to have a future which is not a modern form of slavery. It is a plan and a policy which should make all of us enraged. It is wrong. Tragically wrong.

Since completing this article, the students in Karlovassi have voted to end the occupation and to return to their studies. But the struggle against Athena is by no means over. As to its form and vigour this has yet to be determined.

Sofiane Ait Chalalet and Chris Jones work together meeting and interviewing people on the island of Samos where they live. They are concerned not only with recording the impact of the crisis on the people of Samos but of using their interviews to develop links between people, of stimulating new ideas and ways of surviving that meet human needs and don't destroy our world. We really welcome feedback. And we are more than happy to respond to requests for information about any aspect of life on Samos. Please feel free to contact us at chrishandala@hotmail.com

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