

Inequalities in higher education students' academic performance

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Abstract

In the last decades, despite the implementation of policies aiming at the equality of opportunities in Higher Education (HE) and the improvement of the academic performance of the less privileged students, new forms of inequalities have been raised. This paper examines the factors that influence students' perceptions regarding the implementation of policies that contribute to the development of their performance. Drawing on the concept of "institutional habitus", this study presents results of a survey questionnaire of 322 students in two university institutions in Greece. The selected universities meet the criteria of different history, location and organizational structure. The findings show differences between institutions, which reveal the important role of institutional practices in students' academic performance. The findings highlight the importance of investigating factors other than social background when studying academic success and learning outcomes.

Keywords: higher education, inequalities, students' support practices, institutional habitus, academic performance.

1. Introduction

Regarding the implementation of policies aiming at widening the participation in higher education (Widening Participation-WP), the Greek reforms since 2015 were focused on the performance of underprivileged social groups and their equal participation in HE (Reay, 2018; Shavit, Arum & Gamoran, 2007). In accordance with that, policies aimed at giving emphasis on individual characteristics of students and their academic performance and success. Many studies indicate that academic performance and success are mainly influenced by social background (Crozier, Reay & Clayton, 2008; Archer, Hutchings & Ross 2003).

Instead, recent studies indicate several other factors that intervene with socioeconomic background and affect academic performance and success (authors, 2020). More specifically, the literature shows that institutions have different characteristics and are varied according to how manage diversity and support unprivileged students (Crozier & Reay, 2011). A key element of this variation is that smaller institutions show a `greater willingness to support academically and socially their students following a personalized way to implement the relevant reforms. On the other hand, larger institutions handle these issues at a 'central' level through pre-standardized procedures that students need to discover, follow, and systematically use to receive support at an academic and social level (European Commission, 2015).

According to Crozier et al. (2018), institutions' different wealth and organization result in differentiated students' experiences across and within institutions. Regardless of the measures increasingly put in place to support students both academically and socially at university, in many cases, different institutions provide for their students in different ways (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Despite the emphasis given on widening participation

in higher education to previously underrepresented groups, the commitments to social justice and fairness are fragile in the current neo-liberal context (Reay, 2017; Ball, 2010). Inside the competitive higher education field, working class higher education students continue to fail without realizing their aspirations (Brown et al. 2016). This failure has been seen as the result of a mismatch between students' habitus and the institution's academic and social characteristics (Tinto, 1975). According to Crozier et al. (2018), the differential wealth and organization of the universities result in differentiated students' experiences across and within institutions (Crozier et al., 2008). Different academic performance means different social and economic background as well as different institutional characteristics.

This study aims to highlight students' perceptions, based on institution they attend, regarding the effectiveness of academic success policies. It is based on the idea that except for students' socio-economic background, institutions governance and their differences also need to be carefully studied. For example, OECD (OECD, 2011) give great emphasis on the students' characteristics who complete their studies without, however, much reference to the type of institution they attend. On the other hand, recent research highlights the importance of the institution in understanding the support of students from underprivileged social background (authors, 2020). In accordance with the relevant body of literature, our project problematizes these issues for the Greek context in which very few studies have been conducted.

2. Greek Higher Education Stratification of institutions

In contrast to other EU countries, HE in Greece is exclusively provided by public institutions (Saiti & Prokopiadou, 2008) which are financed and supervised by the Greek Ministry of Education (e.g. funding, infrastructure, working environment and human resources) (Law, 1256/1982, Law, 4009/2011, Law 4485/2017, see also authors, 2020). Students enter Greek universities based on the score achieved at the nationwide exams conducted and supervised by the Greek Ministry of Education at the end of upper secondary education. This is a highly competitive process and when the demand outnumbers the available places, as often occurs for many prestigious departments, the students with the higher grades are admitted. Therefore, the Greek HE system is considered to be selective on the basis of the demand that leads to high admission qualifications at least for specific universities/departments, although there are no official ranking tables for Greek universities. Moreover, students coming from disadvantaged groups face problems that have a strong impact on their performance, completion of their studies and their academic trajectories.

One of the most important relative initiatives that have been promoted in Greek Higher education is radical changes on the entrance procedure. That change causes a greater expansion of new institutions and academic fields, increases students' population diversity and redistributes financial resources to institutions so that it is now a fact that institutions have different social and organizational characteristics. According to Kyprianos and Stergiou, the changes in the stratification of the institutions are explained by the emergence of the new management model of governance (new managerialism), which changed the power relations of the university, contributing decisively to the reduction of public funding (Kiprianos & Stergiou, 2016).

The stratification of institutions, the high degree of selectivity and diversity in academic options are now socially determined (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). In fact, informal hierarchies are formed between the institutions which show that the Greek higher education system is stratified (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010) mainly through a differentiation between "more" and "less" recognized institutions (Gouvias, 2010). For example, there are some institutions such as the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki or institutions specializing in specific academic fields such as the National Technical University of Athens that have more established organizational and administrative structures. In contrast, other institutions established in the Greek periphery are less recognized even if they have a strong tradition and a high degree of selectivity. Finally, there are new established institutions in the periphery, less attractive that primarily serve the needs of the local community. Their services are usually distributed (eg support services in one city and libraries in another city). Different types of institutions in terms of history, tradition, selectivity have a different culture.

Our research aim focusses on examining students' perceptions of the implemented policies that help them improving their academic performance, but also on examining whether their perceptions are differentiated based on the institution they attend.

3. Literature review

Academic performance, as a main indicator of academic success, is related to issues of promoting equality of opportunity in higher education. It is linked to the achievement of learning outcomes by giving equal opportunities to all students to improve their academic achievements and experiences (European Commission, 2015). The literature indicates that academic performance can predict to a significant extent academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Berry & Loke, 2011). Moreover, other research (Croll & Attwood, 2013; Quinn, 2004) focused on students' performance has concluded that disadvantaged students are not prepared to meet institution's demands and are more likely to drop out.

Relevant studies also came to similar results investigating academic performance in relation to students' socioeconomic background (Crozier et al., 2008; Archer et al., 2003; Purcell et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2009). Their findings show that academic performance depends on the social background and mainly on the forms of material, cultural and social capital that the student has incorporated through daily life experiences. This study draws on the Bourdieusian concept of habitus (Bourdieu 2004/1986) as well as on empirical studies which follow Bourdieusian approaches elaborating on the 'institutional habitus' as the mean of structuring students' university experiences in the academic field of practice (Reay et al., 2001; Thomas, 2002). The individual habitus of HE participants is structured by their past and present environments, such as family background, educational experiences and other aspects of culture. Habitus also contributes to shape current and future practices in the field of education. Their habitus shapes their dispositions to choose what is seen as valuable and as commendable according to Bourdieu (2004/1986). In other words, as Bourdieu (1990, 77) states: "Agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances". Although habitus is primarily structured by early experiences in the family (Bourdieu 2004/1986), it is continually

restructured by other contexts. Therefore, habitus can transcend the social conditions of its production (Reay 2004).

In that perspective, 'institutional habitus' is an amalgam of structure and agency; is regarded as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behavior as it is mediated through an organization (Reay et al., 2001; Thomas, 2002). The interaction of students' habitus with the institution plays an important role on their performance (Crozier et al. 2008; Reay et al., 2009) thus shaping the institutional habitus and shows the importance of institutional practices in shaping academic experiences. Many studies examine whether social inequalities have started to decrease and who has benefited from widening participation policies in HE (Crozier, Reay & Clayton, 2019). Crozier & Reay (2011) claim that whilst most of the working-class students had limited experience of the culture of HE on arrival at university, the structure and organisation of the university, in other words the institutional habitus, plays a crucial role for their future academic trajectories supporting or constraining their endeavours (Crozier et al. 2008; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). For example, admission practices for courses in different institutions demonstrate how the official rules shape the experience of students moving into and through HE academic routes (reference). These examples suggest that rules created for the 'selective' part of the HE field can have perverse effects on other parts of the field, creating barriers rather than bridges for students seeking to participate in HE via alternative routes (Bathmaker, 2015). Reay also found that a major factor impacting on working class university experience was the university they attended. More ethnic minority and working-class students go to the University, but they attend poor 'working class' universities in a segregated system revealing an unequal field (Reay, 2017). Overall, the present study builds on the idea that students' habitus is formed through interaction with the institution of study.

4. Methods

Our research project's methodology, conducted the academic year 2020-2021, is based on questionnaires distributed to 322 students (non-probability-convenience sampling) with different social origin who have been studying for at least 3 years. Three Greek universities were selected under four core criteria: a) their different historical origin; b) their location in urban or regional areas of the country; c) the development of their infrastructures, both academic and administrative, in one or more campuses and d) finally the degree of their selectivity as reflected by the annual national university entrance scores. For reasons of anonymity, we have codified both institutions and individuals. UniA is an old prestigious university in the capital of the country. UniB is a new, fast developed but rather small university that operates in many campuses at the region of its location. Thus, the selected institutions "bring" into the project structural characteristics that reflect the existing diversity across the university sector of the country and allow for comparisons and reflections on their interrelations to agents' experiences and views. The aim is to examine issues regarding the ways students coming from diversified family backgrounds experience the implementation of policies that contribute to the development of their performance during their studies in Greek HE. More specifically, we examine:
EE1: What are students' perceptions about the implementation of policies that can enhance their academic performance?

EE2: Do institutional or individual/social factors influence those perceptions?

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Statistics 27.0.1). Table 1 shows sample's demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the first part of the questionnaire

		Frequency	Percentage %
Institution of study	UniA	231	71.7
	UniB	91	28.3
Year of study	3rd	95	30.1
	4rd	103	32.6
	> 4rd	118	37.3
Gender	Female	226	70.6
	Male	94	29.4
Country of birth	Urban area (>10.000)	164	51.1
	Semi-urban area (2.000 – 10.000 residents)	57	17.8
	City center	60	18.7
	Rural area (up to 2.000 residents)	40	12.5
Father's education level	Non primary	3	0.9
	Primary	26	8.2
	Secondary	181	57.2
	Bachelor	90	28.5
	Master/Doctoral	16	5.1
Mother's education level	Non primary	3	1.0
	Primary	14	4.5
	Secondary	158	50.4
	Bachelor	108	34.4
	Master/Doctoral	31	9.9
Occupational classification	1*	38/28	12.3/9
	2	98/115	31.6/37.2
	3	126/89	40.6/28.8

¹ *The categories were: (1) High-level public and private sector executives or employers (e.g. ministers, Members of Parliament, big businessmen)- Officials in the public and private sectors, self-employed in higher scientific professions (e.g. professors, doctors, lawyers), (2) Public and private sector employees or self-employed in lower-level scientific professions (e.g. teachers, bank officials, police officers), (3) Lower-

	4	42/37	13.6/11.9
	5	6/40	1.9/13.1
Annual family income	Up to 5.000 euros	18	5.9
	From 5.001 to 10.000 euros	59	19.5
	From 10.001 to 20.000 euros	102	33.7
	From 20.001 to 30.000 euros	79	26.1
	More than 30.001 euros	45	14.9
Special characteristics	Migrant background	8	
	Disabled	9	
	Access in special category	17	
	Very Low family income	21	
	Refugee	1	
	Other nationality	10	
	Single parent family	45	

4.1 Data Analysis

4.1.1 Policies that enhance academic performance

Students answered a questionnaire (5-point Likert-type scale - (1) "Strongly disagree" - (5)"Strongly agree") (Table 2) about the extent to which they agree that policies (1-13) implemented in Greece can improve learning outcomes. Note that the hypothesis that each of the five possible answers is equally distributed among students, is rejected (at 0.05 significance level; the chi-square goodness of fit test was used) for each of 13 items. The first level (1) "not at all" had the highest frequency for most of the items from Table 2, whereas "Slightly" (2) and "Moderately" (3) were the most frequent answers for most of the items from Table 2. The percentages are counted on the basis of students' positive or negative answers where negative is represented by "not at all" and all other levels represent positive answers. According to the data, students believe that policies that, to a greater extent improve academic performance are those related to the entrance of new teaching and learning methods (43.4%). Furthermore, according to students, academic performance can be improved when the internal and external evaluation system of institutions work systematically (46.9%) as well as when students are well informed by the institution about the career prospects of their academic field (52%). Furthermore, one of the most effective policies is the collaboration with European or other type of institutions (51.9%). Students feel that the competition with other students in an international level is very attractive. On the other hand, distance learning (17.8%) and part-time study programs (18.7%) are not considered to contribute to the

level, non-manual civil and private sector practitioners (e.g.office workers, corporations, police officers)- Manual workers in the public and private sectors, small business,self-employed craftsmen (e.g. small business owners, PPC technicians), (4) Semi-skilled workers (e.g. plumbers, hairdressers)-Unskilled workers or farmers, and (5) Those who have never worked or are unemployed

improvement of their performance. Especially, as for part-time programs many students did not express their view (did not answer- 8.9%). When looking more closely to the table, it is observed that the Greek University has introduced many policies but only few are effective for students. Among the list of items (1-13), the finding that stands out is that most students claim that university provides opportunities for them to enhance their academic performance by only few ways.

Table 2. Students' views about implemented policies

	Not at all	Only a little	To some extent	Rather much	Very much	No answer
1.Improved methods of teaching and learning	1 0.3 %	10 3.1 %	45 14.1 %	124 38.8 %	139 43.4 %	1 0.3 %
2.Internal and external evaluation system	1 0.3 %	21 6.6 %	44 13.8 %	101 31.6 %	150 46.9 %	3 0.9 %
3.Information system about career prospects	3 0.9 %	9 2.8 %	45 14.1 %	91 28.5 %	166 52 %	5 1.6 %
4. Teaching staff skills	3 0.9 %	15 4.7 %	65 20.2 %	111 34.6 %	122 38 %	5 1.6 %
5.Distance learning opportunities	65 20.2 %	59 18.4 %	79 24.6 %	55 17.1 %	57 17.8 %	6 1.9 %
6. Access to libraries and laboratories	0 0 %	12 3.8 %	50 15.7 %	100 31.4 %	143 45 %	13 4.1 %
7. Part-time studying programs	36 11.4 %	49 15.5 %	83 26.3 %	61 19.3 %	59 18.7 %	28 8.9 %
8. Skills development services	2 0.6 %	11 3.4 %	82 25.6 %	114 35.6 %	106 33.1 %	5 1.6 %
9. Promoting indicators for learning outcomes	0 0%	24 7.5 %	94 29.4 %	107 33.4 %	93 29.1 %	2 0.6 %
10.Collaboration with European institutions	4 1.3 %	13 4.1 %	37 11.6 %	92 28.2 %	166 51.9 %	8 2.5 %
11.Exchange programs for students	9 2.8 %	25 7.8 %	52 16.3 %	82 25.6 %	141 44.1 %	11 3.4 %
12. Learning methods focused on students' needs	4 1.3 %	10 3.2 %	51 16.1 %	105 33.1 %	132 41.6 %	15 4.7 %
13. Foreign language teaching programs	14 4.4 %	32 10.1%	59 18.6 %	80 25.2 %	118 37.2 %	14 4.4 %

The descriptive statistics of the items of the questionnaire follows the effect of socioeconomic factors. For the set of questions in Table 2, we computed an average score and then, the main statistical tools used for carrying out the analysis were independent samples t-test and analysis of variance (and corresponding post-hoc procedures). The variables that are examined are institution of study and students' family background that are considered, according to literature, as some of the most influential factors (Reay, 2017; 2018, Crozier, Reay & Clayton, 2019). Family background is a mixed variable which includes students' characteristics based on their family annual income (<10.000), parents' education level and occupational classification.

4.1.2 Institution of study

Firstly, we examined the effect of institution of study on enhancing students' academic performance. For that purpose, a reliability analysis was performed (reliability analysis - Cronbach coefficient 0.836) and a new variable was constructed as the mean of respondents' responses (for the entire sample). The new constructed variable was used for parametric statistical tests, to examine if institution of study influence respondents' views. Only the scores of the participants who answered all the questions in the section (N=266) were used in each test. The statistical tests applied were One-way Anova analysis. The data show that the mean value was high for both University A (Mean value = 3.8954) and University B (Mean value = 4.1289) participants (Table 3). Furthermore, the difference was statistically significant ($t = -3.136$, $df = 166.238$, $p - value = 0.002$) and specifically the score of participants of University B is statistically significantly higher than that of the participants of the university A.

Table 3: Mean score of students' views for policies that improve academic performance

Name of institution		N	Mean	SD
Policies improving academic performance	University A	189	3.8954	0.61823
	University B	77	4.1289	0.52059

Findings provide evidence that institutional characteristics differentiate students' perceptions on how they value policies. Specifically, students coming from newest institution (University B) have more positive views about the extent that applied policies enhance their academic performance. Conversely, students coming from University A have fewer positive perceptions. University A is an older institution with a higher degree of selectivity and, according to the survey findings, its students agree to a lesser extent that the policies listed in table 2 may affect their academic performance. On the other hand, students at University B think that the institution should proceed with innovative reforms to enhance student achievement. They believe that policies can make their experiences more interesting and prevent them from dropping out. It is important to

note that students at University B entered with a lower score (through the Panhellenic exams) compared to the students at University A.

4.1.3 Social and economic background

According to the literature, students from lower social and economic background do not perform as well as students from more advantaged background (Crozier et al. 2008; Reay et al., 2009; authors, 2020). Thus, socioeconomic background is examined as a variable that affects the way that students perceive their academic performance. The data show that neither social nor economic background affect their perceptions to a greater extent (table 4). This study shows that socioeconomic background is not sufficient factor for understanding the differences between students' views about their academic performance and so, other factors more effective should be studied.

Table 4. Effect of socioeconomic background on students' views about their academic performance

Father's education level					
ANOVA test	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.406	6	0.401	1.121	0.350
Within Groups	91.213	255	0.358		
Total	93.619	261			
Father's occupational classification					
Between Groups	1.324	5	0.265	0.729	0.602
Within Groups	89.662	247	0.363		
Total	90.985	252			
Annual family income					
Between Groups	0.330	4	0.082	0.226	0.924
Within Groups	89.851	246	0.365		
Total	90.181	250			

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed at examining students' perceptions about the applied national policies that can enhance their academic performance. Also, to investigate the main factors that affect those perceptions. The data analysis show that students have generally positive opinion about the extent in which national policies play a role in their academic performance. One of the most effective policies is the application of new learning methods. New learning methods offer great opportunities for flexible learning. In contrast, students believe that distance education and opportunity for part-time studies cannot increase their performance. Greek higher education has a traditional profile in comparison with other institutions in European union.

As for the second research question, the independence analysis of the students' views to their family background and the institution of their studies allows space for two concluding points. Firstly, institution of

study rather than students' social and economic background has a significant effect on how students perceive the importance of policies to enhance their performance. These findings provide with evidence that institutional habitus is an important factor that differentiates students' perceptions. Overall, despite the findings of several studies showing the influence of individual and social characteristics, the present research indicated that this relationship should be reconsidered. More research using mixed methodological approaches and larger sample need to be made. The present study, despite the limitations in its methodological and epistemological approach, can provide the impetus for more qualitative research that focus on the issue of institutional habitus, which highlights a new perspective for the Greek HE in the issue of opposing inequalities in achievement and completion of studies.

Secondly, our findings reveal a pattern in relation to how family background and institution of study relate to students' views about academic performance: the different level of selectivity of the institutions in terms of entrance/registration is also present throughout the academic life revealing a perfect match between the status of the institution and the social background of their students (Jin & Ball, 2019). The argument of Jin & Ball (2019: 5) that working class students survive by chance in higher status universities and are always like 'fish out of the water', questioning the effectiveness of the widening participation agenda applies to our findings for Greek universities.

At a policy level, every attempt to analyze the institutions' policies across European countries should take into account these institutional differences as it comes out that educational inequalities are not a one-way process that is predetermined by the family social background of the students but a complex process of structural transformations of the institutions, everyday practices and individual understandings of all agents involved.

The aforementioned results provide indications that, although all institutions have adopted new policies, their different academic profile, in terms of the historic origins of their establishment, the peculiarities of their different location in Greece regarding the "center-periphery" dipole, and the mission these institutions have adopted for their future development, are core for the way their students-both from privileged and non-privileged background, understand and experience academic life in each context. The time and space in which each institution has been established and grew -that is the conditions of its existence as an institution- appear to be inscribed on their institutional habitus in ways that differentiate deeply the ways the institutions implement measures to promote inclusion and teaching and learning processes. At this point, we could argue that the stratification of institutions in the Greek system and society shapes their academic ethos and the ethos of their students in ways that rather reproduce than disrupt HE class inequalities. At the same time, new forms of inequalities and exclusions related to gender and ethnic discriminations are rather marginal to the ethos of the institutions as students experience it. A strong presupposition based on the findings of this first analysis, is that the older and more prestigious institutions tend to be more "elitist" in their academic ethos towards their students (Thomas, 2002). On the other hand, newer universities adopt practices for attracting students and support them graduate successfully as core of their institutional habitus to meet the competition in the academic field. Literature has described different ranks of universities (Archer, 2007). Archer's (2007) description regarding the criteria of universities for developing their academic practices is an interesting starting point for us to consider further, at an analytical level, the different orientations of institutional habitus.

This study hopefully raises the voices of students who experience inequalities at the university and provides insights into better understanding aspects of the persisting and increasing complex inequalities in HE.

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