

New university from the merger of two technological educational institutes - a major step in higher education reforms

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ABSTRACT: The establishment of a new university in Athens through the merging of two technological education institutions is examined in this article. The scrutiny was carried out in relation to the main goals and principles of reforms to education (economic development and equal opportunities), mainly during the post-war period (1956-2018). In all the educational reforms in the post-war period, even after the mid-1980s where an ideological transition took place, the contribution of education to the country's economic development and the provision of equal educational opportunities were basic principles and objectives associated with the basic functions of the Greek education system. In particular, the objective of the contribution of technological education to economic development is linked to market success of the specialisations, while the aim of providing equal opportunities opens up much-needed choice, and therefore social development. The establishment of the University of West Attica (UNIWA) has meant numerous changes and reforms in technological education, as it is the first major challenge to the status of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1956 and 1964, higher education was directly or indirectly linked to socioeconomic changes that took place and it contributed to the propagation of the social structure, to *admission competitions* and to the internal differentiation of higher education. However, the need for the development of schools within the framework of technical vocational education, which would be called higher technical vocational education, was particularly evident in Greece in the 1960s [1]. This started with the diversification of secondary education through the institutionalisation of technical and vocational education, which was intended for students from the working class [2].

The euphoria that prevailed at the time regarding the industrialisation of the country, the prospect of rising employment - especially the growth of skilled employment in a rapidly growing economy - led to the need to create post-secondary/higher university education, which would serve the newly created positions requiring high theoretical knowledge and skills.

As early as 1914, the first two-year foremen schools were established, annexed to the higher schools of the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA), with the main task of educating foremen and middle managers, mainly for public and private projects.

Thus, in 1970, the higher technical education centres (HTEC (KATE)) were set up, aimed at the training of upper-level technical staff, intermediate between the higher scientific and middle-level education, which would contribute to the further promotion of the national economy [3]. In particular, as was said at the time, the aim was to meet the pressing needs of human resources for industry, agriculture, business and health as part of general education reforms to adapt to the requirements of the country's economic development. In short, the founding of the HTEC (KATE) centres responded to a real need to rationalise the country's technological production pyramid.

Since the post-transition period, in the framework of the educational reform that followed, in 1976-77, KATE was renamed by a new law regarding higher technical vocational education centres; and that was HTVEC (KATEE) [4]. However, it was a controversial move because, if the new law did upgrade KATE, with the new name of KATEE, it now belonged to higher education.

The main aim of the government's educational policy was to shift students to technical-professional education, both in secondary education (technical-vocational high school and technical-vocational schools) and in higher education HTVEC (KATEE). Also, the aim of creating secondary and higher technical-vocational education, apart from the production of a skilled workforce, was meeting the demand for education, especially by young people from the *lower* social strata [5].

FROM HTVEC (KATEE) TO TECHNOLOGICAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES (TEI)

In the educational reform of 1981-1985, which was taking place at the time as a financial crisis in Greece, the contribution of education to economic development and equal educational opportunities was, and still remains, a key objective. Various measures were promoted in this direction, such as upgrading the higher technical-vocational education (i.e. abolition of the HTVEC (KATEE)) and the institutionalisation of technological education through the technological educational institutes (TEIs); the cancellation of the flow control of the student population in secondary education; changing the examination system for higher education; and increasing the number of students admitted to higher education institutions, such as TEIs [6].

Thus, in 1981, in a new socioeconomic context and under completely new circumstances (Greece had already become a full member of the European Economic Community), KATEE continued to operate until its abolition and the establishment of the new institutions: the Technological Educational Institutes [7]. The TEIs now belonged to higher education and were intended to provide theoretical and practical training sufficient to apply scientific, technological, artistic or other knowledge to the professions. They also took part in research projects on technology implementation issues. In particular, eleven TEIs were established nationwide, among them the TEI of Athens with five faculties and the TEI of Piraeus with two faculties. The main teaching work was carried out by the teaching staff, who belonged to one of the following grades: professor, assistant professor and lecturer. The members of the teaching staff had an obligation to provide didactic, research or administrative work, just as the members of the teaching staff of the universities do [8].

In 2007, following legislation on the *Reform of the institutional framework for the structure and operation of higher education institutions* [9], higher education now was reported to consist of two parallel areas: a) the university sector, which includes universities, polytechnics and the School of Fine Arts; and b) the technological sector, which includes the TEIs and the Higher School of Pedagogical and Technological Education. The effect of this law was to finalise the *upgrading* of TEIs, at which the duration of study was now eight semesters.

In order to obtain a degree, the student successfully completes a study of up to 40 courses, including the dissertation, practice training and afterwards is awarded a Higher Technological Education degree, with access to postgraduate studies at higher education institutions nationally or abroad.

In 2012, through a new law [10], under the conditions of bankruptcy in Greece, new conditions were created for the operation of universities and the result was the renaming of schools and departments; the merging of departments; and the cancellation of departments and sub-departments. In 2013, following the same law, new Presidential decrees were issued for each TEI, resulting in corresponding changes over the coming years.

As stated in the introductory report of a draft, the TEIs were established to replace KATEEs, which *failed overwhelmingly* because ...*their constitution and development did not rely on any programme that would ensure the educational and socio-economic connection of the institution with the Greek reality, since the graduates did not join the production*. It should also be noted that KATEE was used by graduates as a bridgehead for access to universities (AEI).

However, in general, the law on TEIs has been profound for the Greek education system, particularly in higher education, by upgrading technological education in Greece, while providing an institutional framework similar to that of other member states of the European Union. Moreover, the structure of these new institutions was similar to that of universities.

The TEIs, according to the introductory report of their founding law, were intended, among others, to draw specialists who would be involved in key economic activities, such as: the production/construction sector; the marketing network for disposal products nationally and internationally; as well as in any service sector. In 1996, 14 TEIs were operating nationwide.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ATTICA

Since the 1980s, the country's economy has entered a phase of almost complete financial stagnation, with the higher sector creating new jobs, most of which are covered by higher education graduates. Indeed, to employ them, governments recruited and the public debt increased. As a consequence of this, in the early 1990s economic problems accumulated and the public sector was unable to fulfil the role of absorbing graduates. However, the number of graduates of higher education institutions (HEI) kept increasing.

In particular, in 2015, according to an article published in the newspaper, *Vima*, regarding the *upgrading* of the TEI, the then Rector of the NTUA, Mr Konstantinos Moutzouris stated that 23 HEIs and 16 TEIs - a total of 39 universities - is an excessive number for the population of Greece [11]. In particular, he argued that the number of HEIs and TEIs and the dispersal of schools had led to a degradation of studies and led to most institutions being in a financial stalemate. This is the reason why he promoted the idea of merging the foundations. In summary, his proposal states: *There are parts of HEI and TEI experiencing a survival problem*. As a result, a solution would be the merging of the HEIs and

TEIs located in the same region and those sections that had no future should close. The mergers would be for similar segments. The departments that did not have a subject already taught within a university would become new departments within universities.

The Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Mr Gavrolou, argued that the aim was to upgrade higher education institutions within the unified research area and education rather than the university education of TEIs. Therefore, the establishment of the University of West Attica (UNIWA) with the merger of the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Athens and the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Piraeus was to be a highly interesting undertaking.

On 2 March 2018, a law [12] was published according to which the UNIWA was established as a fully self-governed public law entity based in Egaleo [13]. The TEI of Piraeus, based in Piraeus, and the TEI of Athens, based in Egaleo, are merged to form the University of West Attica, automatically from the time of its establishment, without any other procedure and by way of derogation (exemption) from any other applicable provision.

The establishment of the University of Western Attica is aimed at addressing the educational, social, cultural and developmental needs of the country, which relate in particular to the following fields:

- social, administrative and economic sciences;
- engineering sciences;
- food sciences;
- health and welfare sciences;
- artistic studies.

The University of West Attica has two campuses. Campus 1 is located at Agios Spyridonos Street in Egaleo, and Campus 2 is located at Thivon Street, also in Egaleo. Both campuses include conference centres, libraries, restaurants, gymnasias, health services, canteens and leisure facilities for students.

INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE UNIWA

Temporary and until the appointment of the governing bodies of the University of West Attica by election, the foundation is administered by the Administrative Committee, which has the competence of the senate, while the faculties, the departments and the sectors of each department are administered by temporary deans, presidents and managers, respectively. There is a 15-member management committee consisting of members of higher education institutions' teaching and research staff, active or retired, set up by decision of the Minister of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. The President and its Vice-President, who acts as Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Student Welfare, are appointed. The Vice-President's individual responsibilities are determined by a similar decision.

The structure of the administrative departments of the UNIWA consists of:

- a) General Directorate for Finance, Planning and Development and
- b) General Directorate of Administrative and Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

The first administrative department consists of the Directorate of International and Public Relations, the Directorate of Economics, Technical Services and the Directorate of Informatics Network and Computer Engineering, while the second administrative department consists of the Directorate of Administration, the Directorate of Student Support, the Directorate of Student Welfare, the Directorate of Entré Training and Lifelong Learning, and the Directorate of Academic Institutions Support.

FACULTIES AND DEPARTMENTS OF THE UNIWA

In the founding university 26 departments were set up in five faculties, instead of the 36, which were collectively in the two TEIs. The new departments have new curricula, with some of them taking on new fields of knowledge, and are as follows:

- a) Faculty of Engineering, consisting of eight departments.
- b) Faculty of Administrative, Economic and Social Sciences, consisting of six departments.
- c) Faculty of Applied Arts and Culture, consisting of four departments.
- d) Faculty of Health and Welfare Sciences, consisting of six departments.
- e) Faculty of Food Sciences, which consists of two departments.

The first course at the University of West Attica has eight academic semesters and includes courses corresponding to 240 credit units.

Registered students, who have not completed all the degree requirements required by the curricula of the departments of the merged TEIs, automatically are assigned to the departments of the UNIWA. The undergraduate courses of the

departments of the merging TEIs continued according to the curricula, until the completion of semesters and examinations for the academic year 2017-2018. The undergraduate programmes of the departments of each faculty of the University of West Attica were applied from the winter semester of the academic year 2018-2019.

By an act of the President of each department (following a relevant decision of the Assembly of the Departments), courses of study of the departments of the merging TEIs are taught with courses of study of the departments of the University of West Attica, and are determined as:

- remaining courses for the TEI departments degree, and the corresponding number of courses that the student must successfully complete for the courses offered by the departments of the University plus the internship;
- additional theoretical courses, which the student must successfully follow for completing the first cycle of university studies and obtaining the university degree.

Postgraduate programmes from the departments of the two TEIs continue until the completion of each programme by registered students [14], and graduates are awarded a postgraduate department diploma of the UNIWA.

All staff at the Technological Educational Institute of Athens and Technological Educational Institute of Piraeus, with the corresponding posts, including temporary or personal posts, are transferred automatically to the University of West Attica. The transfer of staff ascertained by the Chairman of the Administrative Committee is published in the Government Gazette and refers to the date of the establishment of the University.

FUNCTIONAL PROBLEMS AT THE UNIWA

The initiative for the new university establishment was considered important academically, developmentally and socially, as positive feedback shows from the external evaluation by ADIP (Quality Assurance of University Education) for the two technological institutes [15][16]. However, the start of the new academic year 2018-2019 was not without many operational problems for the new University.

According to an announcement by the UNIWA Administrative Committee, the beginning of the course was scheduled for Monday, 15 October, 2018. Until then, the assignments had not been submitted to faculty members; the procedures for signing contracts for academic scholars had not begun; the timetable programmes of many departments had not been finalised; and the selections of courses by students had not been made. This created the impression that the aim was to implement EU directives to accelerate the creation of the higher education area (EXAE), in which the University had to deliver entrepreneurship in order to create the educational and research market for servicing and meeting the needs of society.

As a result, students and workers are facing larger obstacles, both in terms of study, as well as in terms of labour rights. Initially, the number of new posts for hiring extra teaching staff at the University of West Attica was significantly reduced. According to the Administrative Committee, more than 7,000 hours were completed by the extra teaching staff in the previous academic year, but there was still a deficiency.

This year, the posts are limited to 3,360 hours, which means no recruitment of extra staff who, for years, have covered stated needs. The *reinforcing* 1,320 hours will be covered by young scientists, who will be able to complete coursework for learning experience.

Also, the consequences of cuts and underfunding of study are particularly important, because curricula are modified in an attempt to manage the situation and laboratory lessons are *deleted* and converted into lectures in the form of presentations, while the workshops take place in groups per two weeks in order to overcome the problem of supernumerary students. Such a situation is faced, for example, by the students of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering with a two-hour laboratory.

Workshops of 60 people cannot work practically; security issues arise, since, in many laboratories, materials and machinery can become dangerous if there is no supervision. In addition, the theoretical courses, attended by about 200 students, are held in classrooms with a capacity of 130 people. The belief is the new university does not require practical work by students using laboratory benches. However, it should be emphasised that the lack of the abolished laboratories - the practice - is a tremendous degradation of the educational prowess of the new university, because graduates of the institute will be required to find work with no practical knowledge of their subject.

Thus, in order to treat immediately the problems of operation by the University of West Attica, the following must be ensured:

- Uninterrupted and sufficient government funding, to fully cover the educational and research needs of UNIWA.
- No change to faculty teaching hours, to ensure adequate time for scientific and research activity.
- Announcements of faculty positions needed to meet the needs of quality teaching and research.

- The necessary logistical infrastructure (buildings, equipment, and training supplies) to conduct teaching and research in satisfactory conditions. In particular, it is important to strengthen the infrastructure, teaching classrooms, laboratories and other equipment which, in many cases, is obsolete and lacking.
- Complete development and increase in state funding for student care (free feeding, housing, books, and so on), so that all students can complete their studies without interruption.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational reforms have contributed to transforming the way in which the education system performs the functions of choice, specialisation and development. Key features of this transformation are: a) the shift of choice from one step to the next; and b) the internal differentiation; these are directly linked to each other.

During the post-war period (1956-2018), all educational reforms, among their basic aims, set the contribution of education to economic development and social justice. Economic development was linked to the development of technical-vocational education. Social justice in the form of guaranteeing equal educational opportunities was linked to a series of measures (free education, primary school, nine years of compulsory education, and so on), and mainly by expanding the education system.

However, the objectives appear to have not been achieved. Technical-professional training did not contribute to economic growth, because it seems that was not necessary or the need of it, was minor. All production sectors, including tertiary, have used traditional ways of production, which are characterised by little know-how. Even when heavy industry was developed in Greece, the required know-how was imported. Therefore, the abolition of higher technological education was deemed necessary, since it essentially did not achieve its purpose.

Due to its origins (a merger of two technological educational institutes), the University of West Attica is expected to fill the gaps created by educational reforms where intermediate levels of technical and vocational education were transformed into universities. Thus, substantial university-level education in the technology sectors will now be provided.

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