

The Evaluation and the Accreditation Process of Greek HEIs with an Emphasis on Primary Education Departments

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the quality evaluations of the Greek Universities highlighting those which offer a full-fledged study program of primary education. There are eight principles-criteria according to which each university is evaluated. For each principle, scores may range from 1 (noncompliance with the principle) to 4 (fully compliance). I present and compare results of the Greek University evaluations completed by the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA). Surprisingly, no university has been graded as non-complied in any of the eight principles-criteria. These evaluations are performed by an allegedly external and independent committee. For all practical purposes, they are, nevertheless, based on subjective and biased opinions of academics affiliated with international universities but with links to Greece and its universities. Independent and evidence based evaluations paint a different picture. Universities which get perfect scores in the quality evaluation processes perform badly in the pertinent international ranking systems. As a case study, their primary education departments have lower research performance with high variability between faculty members and departments. Given that one criterion of evaluating quality is research, then not all Greek Universities can be evaluated as high research performance institutions either in absolute or relevant terms. This criterion of quality is not satisfied by the Primary Education Departments of Greek Universities. According to this evidence, the HQA as an agency to assess and accredit quality is useless. It should be abolished. A new system should be based on objective criteria such as independent teaching evaluations and research performance. These do not require any committee to evaluate performance and can be constructed on evidence-based policy. The latter relies solely on rigorously established objective facts.

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1. Introduction

Quality assurance and excellence in higher education of both teaching and researching is a critical issue in Europe and North America. Specialized accreditation organizations provide the service of organizing the evaluation process and accredit universities and study programs. In Europe, the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) (<https://enqa.eu/>) and in USA the *Council for Higher Education Accreditation* (CHEA) (<https://www.chea.org/>) and the *Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology* (ABET) (<https://www.abet.org/>) are well known examples of organizations which provide evaluations, quality assurances and accreditation of university study programs.

The literature on the subject of quality and excellence in education is huge. The concept of excellence in Higher Education is discussed in a working paper published by ENQA (2014). New challenges coming from colleges offering non-accredited courses are discussed by Ransom et al (2018); mainly massive open online courses (MOOCs). On the effectiveness of online courses see Bettinger et al (2017) and McPherson & Bacow (2015). Similar to this research is the pilot project by Oberhelman & Dunn (2019). School quality and postsecondary attainment is discussed by Deming et al (2014). Furthermore, ATINER publishes a quarterly periodical –*The Athens Journal of Education*–, which has published a number of papers dealing with quality in education; among many others see Alduais (2019), Altin (2019), Bales (2015), Bosmans, Young & McLoughlin (2019), Budgen & West (2018), Curtis (2015), Haukland (2020) and Wawrzinek, Ellert & Germelmann (2017). See also the paper by Al Ghawiel (2020) published in the *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* and examines quality in Libyan Universities. Furthermore, OECD has produced a number of reports on education which includes quality. Special reports on Greece include the following studies:

1. Education for a Bright Future in Greece (OECD, 2018)
2. Education Policy in Greece: A Preliminary Assessment (OECD, 2017)
3. Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools: Greece (OECD, 2012)
4. Education Policy Advice for Greece (OECD, 2011)

5. Country Background Report: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers: Greece (OECD, 2004)

In Greece the quality assurance of university study programs is provided by the *Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency* (HQA) (<https://www.adip.gr/en>). This is an independent organization funded by the Greek government and its operations are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. It was established in 2006 with a mission to promote high quality in Greek Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). It is affiliated as a full member with the ENQA. HQA is governed by a President and Council of 10 HEIs professors and members representing non-academic research institutes, chambers and students. As part of its mission, HQA evaluates all Greek Universities and their programs; makes assessments and provides accreditations. In addition, in 2013 an independent *Authority for Quality Assurance in Primary and Secondary Education* (<http://www.adippde.gr/>) was established with a mission to evaluate the quality of the Greek educational system of primary and secondary level. It supports the Greek Ministry of Education in designing its policies. In the 2015-2016 school year there were 642,797 elementary students organized in 4,384 schools and 65,229 teachers. It is a herculean task to evaluate these schools.

The purpose of this paper is to compare HQA's evaluations of the Greek Universities with those that do not offer a primary education study program with those that they do not offer a program. Furthermore additional indicators are used to evaluate and compare all Greek Universities and the faculty research record who teach in Greek primary education departments. Including this introduction, the paper is organized into six sections. The next section presents overall data of Greek university student population. In this research a distinction is made between active and non-active students which is a thorny issue in the Greek system of HEIs. The third section of the paper discusses the principles (criteria) used to evaluate the education quality of Greek Universities. The fourth section of the paper shows the international ranking of the Greek Universities and the fifth the research scores of the Primary Education Departments. The last section concludes with a discussion on teacher quality.

2. The Greek University Student Population

All students take entrance exams to get into a Greek University. All Greek Universities are public¹. Some private for profit universities do exist offering courses at a college level but for all practical purposes their programs are of lower quality primarily because they attract students who did not make it into the public university by failing entrance exams. Studying at a Greek Public University is relatively cost-free. Students pay no fees and get their textbooks for free. Those students who come from poor families get full tuition (meals and housing). Public transportation can be used at a lower cost; often there are student discount prices to attend various cultural events such as cinema, theater, sports events etc. In some cases (e.g., exhibitions), entrance is free for university students. Thus, for students who come from poor families studying at a Greek University may not be a big financial burden. Nevertheless, many students do work during their study years to complement their income. Most of them work in the informal economy which includes private tutoring. For good students of the Primary Education Departments this is a good source of revenue with great time flexibility because they tutor during off-school hours. However, this is not without any serious repercussions for the quality of the programs offered by the Greek Universities.

Table 1 reports university student populations as well as some important ratios. It also shows the year of establishment of the university in column (1). The oldest university is the University of Athens established in 1837; about ten years after the Greek liberation from the Ottoman yoke. The newest university in the list is the University of Western Macedonia which was established in 2004. The average age of all Greek Universities is 82 years.

Columns (2), (3) and (5) provide data on (a) the total number of active students (b) the total number of registered students and (c) the total number of students who graduated during the academic year 2010/2011 respectively. The distinction between active and registered students is very critical. Active students are those who are in a year of study which does not exceed the $N+2$ years of the required N years of their study program. For example, the civil engineering program is five years. Students who do it in less than seven years are active students. All those who

¹The issue of Public vs Private (and non-accredited) has been well researched in the literature; see among many others Fethke & Policano (2013) and the review of this work by Ehrenberg (2014).

exceed seven years (the N+2 rule) are non-active students. The sums of active and non-active students make up the number of registered students. Column (4) and (6) report the percentage of active students to the total population of students and the percentage of students who graduated to the total number of registered students respectively.

Table 1. Number of Students in Greek Universities, 2010-2011

		Year	Active Students	Registered Students	RA (2)/(3)	Grad	RG (5)/(3)
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1	Agricultural University of Athens	1920	3,033	4,731	64.1%	277	5.9%
2	Athens School of Fine Arts	1837	919	1,445	63.6%	122	8.4%
3	Athens University of Business and Economics	1920	9,108	17,427	52.3%	1,293	7.4%
4	Democritus University of Thrace	1973	15,208	20,900	72.8%	2,158	10.3%
5	Harokopio University	1929	1,148	1,379	83.2%	145	10.5%
6	Ionian University	1984	2,556	3,558	71.8%	301	8.5%
7	National Technological University of Athens	1836	10,897	18,530	58.8%	1,581	8.5%
8	Panteion University	1927	12,849	20,129	63.8%	3,152	15.7%
9	Technical University of Crete	1977	2,620	3,358	78.0%	224	6.7%
10	University of Athens	1837	45,129	104,160	43.3%	6,851	6.6%
11	University of Crete	1973	10,928	14,480	75.5%	1,370	9.5%
12	University of Ioannina	1964	11,783	16,245	72.5%	1,638	10.1%
13	University of Peloponnese	2002	3,247	3,521	92.2%	288	8.2%
14	University of Piraeus	1938	9,628	19,760	48.7%	1,463	7.4%
15	University of Thessaloniki	1925	6,851	67,236	10.2%	7,617	11.3%
16	University of Thessaly	1984	7,510	9,183	81.8%	1,362	14.8%
17	University of Western Macedonia	2004	2,801	3,122	89.7%	296	9.5%
	Total		156,215	329,164	47.5%	30,138	9.2%
	Average	82	9,189	19,363	66.02%	1,773	9.37%
	Maximum		45,129	104,160	92.20%	7,617	15.70%
	Minimum		919	1,379	10.20%	122	5.90%

Notes: Active students are defined as the number of students who have not exceeded the (N+2) years of study. N: is the total number of years required to graduate. Registered students include all active students plus the students who have exceeded the (N+2) years of study.

Source: Various publications and individual universities.

The total university student population was 329,164 students. Less than half of them (47.5%) or 156,215 students were active. This is the result of the two largest universities of Greece with the highest number of non-active students. One explanation might be the cost-free studying at the university. Some students have no incentive to either finish their study program as early or possible or withdraw from the program². This imposes an important burden on universities' resources and therefore the quality of the programs offered. Students are able to retain their student status because they do not pay any registration fee. One solution would have been students to pay a fee if not finishing within the normal period of time (N+2 years). Older universities tend to have lower percentages of active to registered students because they have "accumulated" non-active students who do not drop out of the program no matter how many years have elapsed from the first-year registration. In the University of Athens –the oldest Greek University- this ratio is 43.3%. The average Greek University has 9,189 active students with a maximum of 45,129 (University of Athens) and a minimum of 919 students (Athens School of Fine Arts). The average annual graduation rate is 1,773 students and the total 30,138 students.

3. The Accreditation Criteria and the Scorecard of Greek Universities

The Greek Public Universities are evaluated for quality provision of educational services by the *Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency* (HQA). According to their standards, there exist eight principles which are referred in Table 2.

A brief presentation of each principle follows based on HQA (2016) report and various guidelines.

Institution Policy for Quality Assurance

Implementation through:

- Compliance with the laws and regulations that govern the Institution;

²There are many reasons why this may occur. First, students are working full time and they hope to return one day to finish their studies. Many of them never do. Second, students keep their student status to put off their obligation to serve in the military. Third, few retain their student status because they are involved in student politics and aspire to a political career. No evidence could be found but I believe the first reason should be the dominant explanation.

- Review, redesign and redefinition of quality assurance objectives whether they are fully in line with the institutional strategy.

This policy mainly supports:

- the organization of the internal quality assurance system;
- the Institution’s leadership, departments and other organizational units, individual staff members and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance;
- the integrity of academic principles and ethics, guarding against discriminations, and encouragement of external stakeholders to be involved in quality assurance;
- the continuous improvement of learning and teaching, research and innovation;
- the quality assurance of the programs and their alignment with the relevant HQA Standards;
- the effective organization of services and the development and maintenance of infrastructure;
- the allocation and effective management of the necessary resources for the operation of the Institution;
- the development and rational allocation of human resources

Table 2. Principles (Criteria) of Evaluation

Principle	Description
1	Institution Policy for Quality Assurance
2	Provision & Management of the Necessary Resources
3	Establishing Goals for Quality Assurance
4	Structure, Organization and Operation of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS)
5	Self-Assessment
6	Collection of Quality Data: Measuring, Analysis and Improvement
7	Public Information
8	External Evaluation and Accreditation of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS)

Source: HQA (2016)

Provision & Management of the Necessary Resources

- Funding
- Infrastructure
- Working environment
- Human resources

Establishing Goals for Quality Assurance

Some Examples:

- Average annual graduation rate of the Institution's Undergraduate Programs
- Learning environment through the introduction of digital applications
- Ratio of scientific publications of faculty and graduate students
- External research funding

Structure, Organization and Operation of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS)

- The system of evaluation includes the assessment of effectiveness (results oriented) and efficiency (cost oriented).

Self-Assessment

- The data considered in the context of the self-assessment of a program may, for example, include:
 - students' performance;
 - feedback from students / teaching staff;
 - assessment of learning outcomes;
 - graduation rates;
 - feedback from the evaluation of the facilities/ learning environment;
 - report of any remedial or precautionary actions undertaken;
 - suggestions for improvement.

Collection of Quality Data: Measuring, Analysis and Improvement

The Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the University should establish and operate an information system to manage the data required for the implementation of the Internal Quality Assurance System.

Public Information

The QAU publishes data on:

- IQAS structure, organization and operation
- Pertinent to the institutional quality policy and objectives
- Relevant to the Institution's internal and external evaluation. In the context of the self-assessment process.
- Adequate information regarding the teaching activities
- Program's profile and
- the overall institutional activity is publicly available.

For all the QAU makes recommendations for improvement.

External Evaluation and Accreditation of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS)

External quality assurance (aiming at accreditation) may act as a mean of verification of the effectiveness of the Institution's internal quality assurance and as a catalyst for improvement, universities engage in periodic external quality assurance which is conducted by taking into consideration the legal structure of Greek Public Universities. Quality assurance, in this case accreditation, is an on-going process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the University. Universities warrant that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

For each principle, a score is marked when the university is fully compliant with a given principle (criterion), substantially compliant, partially compliant and non-compliant. We give the score of 1-4 in the order of importance as shown in Table 3 in order to quantify our results in a compact and comparative form.

Table 3. Principles of Evaluating Universities

Evaluation of Each Principle	Score
Fully compliant	4
Substantially compliant	3
Partially compliant	2
Non-compliant	1

The evaluation committee provides a grade for each of the eight principles and for each university. Table 4 reports the score for each principle. The universities marked with an asterisk have a fully-fledged and independent department of primary education.

Table 4. Greek University Scores in Terms of the Eight Principles

University	Principle								Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Athens*	3	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	30
Thessaloniki*	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	3	29
Aegean*	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	29
Patra*	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32
Ioannina*	4	3	3	4	3	3	2	2	24
Crete*	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	31
Thrace*	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32
Thessaly*									
Athens School of Fine Arts	4	3	4	3	3	2	2	4	25
School of Pedagogical and Technological Education	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	21
Athens Economics and Business	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	31
Macedonia	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	28
Peloponnese	3	3	2	4	4	3	3	4	26
TEI of Crete	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	27
Harokopio Athens	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	31
Piraeus	4	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	28
Average	3.60	3.60	3.60	3.67	3.53	3.20	3.40	3.67	26.5
Maximum	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32
Minimum	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	21

*Universities with a Primary Education Department

The maximum score is 32 points (100%). Two universities were evaluated as top with 32 points or 100% (University of Patra and University of Thrace). They got perfect marks in all eight criteria. Both of them have a primary education department. The School of Pedagogical and Technological

Education, which is not a university, got the lowest total mark of 21 points (65%). The stunning finding is that there is not a single university which got a non-compliant in any of the eight criteria. As I explain in my introduction this is the result of cronyism and politics which so much affect the operation of the Greek HEIs.

The average score in all criteria was above 3, seven criteria were marked on average above 3.5 and one 3.2. These “excellent” marks must be the result of the fact that the committee members are university professors themselves. Most of them are expatriate Greeks with professional and academic relations with domestic Greek universities. This inflated performance undermines the whole process of quality assurance and makes it literally useless. A need arises for a new approach to evaluate the Greek Universities.

In the following two sections of this paper, I use two different criteria of evaluating the Greek universities: (a) the international ranking of the universities and (b) the research performance of their faculty using the primary education departments as a case study.

4. International Rankings of Greek Universities

Table 5 uses an international comparison of Universities made available by a well-known – famous or infamous-, private company which reports data based on various criteria. Even though I report their scores, I disagree with their approach. Each University should be evaluated according to its mission. This is not the same across all HEIs.

I will demonstrate it with an example. As ATINER’s President, I organized a roundtable discussion on university quality³. Six academics from different countries and HEIs with different mission were presenting and discussing their case. One professor from a well-known old Scottish University was emphasizing research and the University’s score on research which was ranked one of the top in the world (top 1% in the list). It seemed to me that everybody agreed that this should be the strategic scope of a university, i.e., doing good research.

Then the question is posed: if good research is produced by the top 10% of the over 14,000 universities which exist in the world, the other universities what do they do? The last speaker was the president of a small German University which had in its mission to link teaching at the

³See <https://www.atiner.gr/events/2July2018ECO.pdf>

university with available jobs in the private market and industry. They taught their students those subjects which the society and the economy were short of. Their mission was enshrined in their constitution: find good jobs for their graduates. According to this criterion or rather principle, this small university was number one in the world because 100% of its graduates found job before the graduation date. I do not think any of the 14,000 universities in the world can surpass this achievement. According to the ranking methodology of the well-known private company of assessing the quality of the universities, this institution is one of the worst universities in the world.

Table 5. University Rankings, 2019

	Rank⁴	G	S	S/S	I	F/M
Crete*	351-400	1	14,890	27.8	4%	61:39
Athens*	501-600	2	54,364	27.5	11%	62:38
Aegean*	601-800	3	12,352	38.7	1%	57 : 43
Thessaloniki*	601-800	4	46,597	26.3	5%	58:42
Athens University of Economics and Business	601-800	5	9,839	46.9	4%	47 : 53
Ioannina*	601-800	6	22,492	44.3	3%	56 : 44
Patra*	801-1000	7	26,098	29.9	4%	49 : 51
Thrace*	1001+	8	29,386	46.9	3%	54 : 46
Thessaly*	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Athens School of Fine Arts	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
School of Pedagogical and Technological Education	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Macedonia	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Peloponnese	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
TEI of Crete	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Harokopio Athens	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Piraeus	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL

G: Ranking number among Greek Universities; NL: Not listed in the rank (below the 10% top universities); S: Number of Students; S/S: Number of Students per Staff; I: International Students; F/M: Female/Male ratio of students.

With this note in mind, Table 5 presents the ranking of the Greek Universities in this list. The top Greek University ranks in the top 400 universities in the world (University of Crete)

⁴See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/>

with 14,890 students, with a relative low students/staff ratio (27.8 students per staff), relatively high international students' rate (4%) and a very high ratio of female to male students (61%). Only seven Greek Universities make it to the 10% list of the top universities and all of them have Department of Primary Education with the exemption of the Athens University of Business and Economics which is a specialized university and does not offer study programs other than business and economics. Only one university out of the eight which do not make it to the top list has a primary education department.

It seems that the universities with primary education departments are doing very well. The next section looks at these departments' record in research performance.

5. The Research Scorecard of the Greek Primary Education University Departments

With the exception of the University of Thessaly, HQA has organized and produced an external evaluation of all other Primary Education Departments. These reports are available and freely accessed on the website of HAQ (see the list in the reference sector at the end of this paper). There is also an accreditation process which will follow the external evaluations. The purpose of the external evaluations is to provide recommendations which would help the department to improve. These recommendations are given at the end of each report.

I found all of them vague and therefore useless. Since this section evaluates the research profile of the primary education of Athens, one of the recommendations of the University of Athens' Department of Primary Education is to "Reconsider the profile of the primary education teacher to meet the changing societal needs in the 21st century multicultural classroom". Instead of saying that the research profile is not acceptable and before they get accreditation they must increase their research stats to national average or the average of the top three departments. This is a recommendation that does stand the test of compliance or not. Quality assurance and evaluation requires "hard evidence" and this is provided by the various international indices of research production and recognition

One such index to measure research performance is the *h-index* which is calculated as the number of publications which have at least h citations. For example a score of 20 means that 20 publications had at least 20 citations each. This is to avoid a relatively well cited paper which

will bias the research performance of a researcher. This index is not without its shortcoming but this is used quite frequently to evaluate academic research at (a) the individual researcher level (b) the departmental level and (c) the university level.

Table 6 reports my calculations of the total and the average h-index for the faculty members of the nine Greek Universities which have a Primary Education Department. This has been estimated by adding up the h-scores of all individual full-time faculty members of each department.

Table 6. Evaluating Research Performance (The h-index) of the Faculty Members of the Primary Education Departments of Greek Universities

University	Number of Faculty Members	Total h-index	Average h-index	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Athens	24	76	3.17	3.60	0	12
Thessaloniki	27	70	2.59	2.74	0	12
Patra	25	212	8.48	7.61	0	29
Ioannina	20	61	3.05	4.71	0	15
Aegean	20	64	3.2	2.93	0	9
Thessaly	16	81	5.06	6.12	0	21
Crete	19	16	0.84	1.30	0	4
Thrace	20	67	3.35	4.75	0	16
Western Macedonia	18	20	1.11	1.71	0	6
Total	189	667				
Average		74.11	3.43			
Standard Deviation		56.69	2.27			

The results are rather surprising. First, the Department of the University of Patras has the highest score in terms of the *h-index* which is two and half times higher than the average *h-index* of all Greek Departments of Primary Education. Not shown in the table, four professors from the University of Patra have an excellent (top) research index of more than 20 in the *h-index*. Second, the University of Crete which ranked top in the previous list, its Primary Education department ranks at the bottom of the list of Table 6 with very disappointed research stats (less than one). Third, all departments have faculty members with no research recognition; at least according to the *h-index*. In general, the average *h-index* is very low. With the exemption of the University of Patra, all departments have an average *h-index* of 5 or lower.

5. Conclusions

The system of the Greek University Evaluation of Quality demands its own evaluation. For all its practical purposes the *Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency* (HQA) is useless wasting public funds which could have been used otherwise. According to HQA's evaluations and in all eight criteria, all Greek Universities were fulfilling the standards set by HQA. Not even in a single principle (criterion) got a non-compliance grade. This is hardly believable and one may safely conclude that these evaluations are biased and subjective.

Quality assurance or whatever this might be called can be measured using "hard data" which now can be easily obtained from various sources and free of any cost. One such independent and objective index is the *h-index*. This index measures research performance and was applied to the Greek Departments of Primary Education. The results show a complete different picture from the ones provided by the "external" evaluations of HQA agency.

This leaves unaccounted teaching quality. There are methods of evaluating teachers' performance and university's teaching quality. I have already mentioned the differences in missions of various universities. Good teaching gives results. Students are able to compete in the market place and find jobs. Such indices of evaluating teaching quality which are based on hard data are not available. I hinted above that the employability of graduates might be considered as a "hard evidence" of teaching quality. Are HEIs faculty members teachers or researchers? Mannes (2020) examined teachers and researchers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an Israeli college context. Most teachers who participated in the research emphasized the practical dimension of their teaching, i.e., train good teachers to teach EFL.

There are many studies which discuss the evaluation of teacher quality at all level of education; see for example Hanushek & Rivkin (2006). The Departments of Primary Education has an advantage in measuring the teaching quality of their students who will become teachers in primary schools. Bruns et al (2019) review this literature on teacher quality at the primary education level and Marsha et al (2019) of secondary student evaluation of university teachers. This is a promising area of research which can be used to evaluate university teaching.

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