



# High expectations for private universities

COMMENTARY | BY MANOS MATSAGANIS \*

Is there any truth to the government's assertion that private universities will "benefit the students, their families and the Greek economy in multiple ways"?

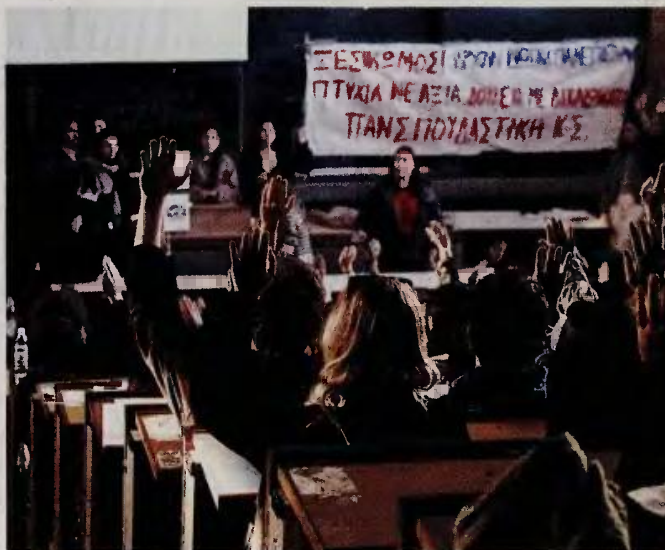
The simple fact is that private universities will most likely attract the same people that private colleges did: young men and women who didn't do well enough in the national university entrance exams to make it into the public university of their choice and whose families cannot afford to send them abroad to study. Private universities and recognition of their degrees – allowing graduates to enter the ranks of controlled professions – will also divert flows from less attractive state universities in the provinces and abroad.

I cannot see how students stand to benefit from these new institutions. Studying away from home, even at a mediocre university, helps youngsters become more mature and more in touch with reality. Exposure to how people in a more advanced country think, behave and work also broadens their intellectual horizons in ways that local experiences often cannot. By contrast, studying at a private university conveniently located near their families tends to delay independence, which, in turn, prolongs immaturity and reinforces parochial attitudes. As for the families, no one stands to benefit from what will most likely be a mediocre education, close to home.

And the benefits to the Greek economy? Let's start with the fact that tertiary education has already skyrocketed. According to Eurostat, the percentage of Greeks aged 25-34 with a degree or a master's has shot up from 24.8% in 2004 to 44.5% in 2024, even higher than the European Union average of 44.1%.

However, according to the latest Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study on adult competencies (PIAAC), 19% of Greek degree holders aged up to 34 years old were functionally illiterate, meaning that they could not understand relatively simple texts on everyday subjects or do simple maths. No other country performed so poorly.

This is the problem – and it is huge and overlooked. It is centered mostly on secondary education (as well as on primary education, honestly) but also concerns public universities. The real question,



The student union at the Athens University School of Philosophy holds a meeting to vote on how it will oppose the government's plan to allow private universities to operate in Greece, in a February 2024 file photo. The writer argues that the country would benefit more by bolstering its state universities.

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therefore, is whether private universities will be governed by rules and standards that prevent them from handing out degrees to young men and women who are functionally illiterate. There are no indications that this will be the case; if anything, the opposite – that they will be less rigorous – seems to be true.

Admittedly, the delay in legalizing private universities was an unnecessary loose end that needed to be tied up. And it has been. But this has not been accompanied by the essential conversation about standards across all levels of education, both private and public, which has not even started.

Moreover, even if private university graduates are literate, their contribution to the Greek economy will not come to much if they gravitate toward already saturat-

ed sectors. Do we really need more business consultants, psychologists, doctors and lawyers? If not, then all these young graduates will simply squeeze other candidates out of a job. And if the skills they were taught at university are below par, they will harm rather than benefit their sector.

The other matter the issue of private universities raises is how public universities and their research centers contribute to the country's economy. The real untapped resource here is research. But schools with summer or postgraduate programs in the English language also show great potential.

Many of Greece's universities have solid international reputations and connections, as well as high-caliber professors and academics, which can make them competitive. Where they are sorely lacking is in infrastructure (just take student accommodation, for example), administrative services and security. So, if we really want to bolster tertiary education's contribution to the economy, we should start by investing in these things.

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