

MENON Policy Brief

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About the author



Dr. Nikitas Kastis is the President of the MENON Network and the Director of the Lambrakis Foundation. He has been member of the "Advisory Committee for the introduction of IT in Schools" of the Greek Ministry of Education and Chair of the "Open Classroom" Working Group of the "European Distance Education Network" (EDEN).

Human and Social Capital development policies: a growth priority for Europe

Ideas and recommendations for reforming the education and training systems: the case of Greece, a European society under crisis

National authorities in the EU Member States and in Europe at large are urgently faced with the need to define a set of achievable priorities for reform of their formal and informal education and training (learning) systems, while being currently under - in some cases - severe economic and social crisis, in the context of the Eurozone and international financial instability.

The case of Greece, with its imminent needs to undertake well-documented, focused and relevant human and social capital building actions, eloquently linked to – hopefully - integrated employment and growth supporting policies, while being a typical and acute case of reference, corresponds to an emergency situation, asking for immediate, collective EU action. The above mentioned societal context provides a unique case, whereby the EU institutions and its Member States are asked to jointly contribute, with urgency, to a highly demanding, sophisticated and well balanced exercise of public policy reforms, with a tightly defined window of opportunity and rather high, relative to the available know-how and resources, expectations.

It is more than evident that to couple fiscal discipline and austerity measures with growth supporting policies, in order to speed up the recession cycle and reach the turning point with substantiated growth potential, the widely accepted and traditionally deployed economic measures, including tax allowances and sometimes targeted funding (investment) vehicles with «fast tracking» procedures to deal with bureaucracy, are not enough. These measures have to be coupled with integrated human capital strengthening ones, for the up-skilling of human resources and both short and mid-term as well as long-term objectives, including a generalised change of attitudes. It is only then, that the economy and society will manage to overcome the crisis and enter to a sustainable growth path, with well-founded sovereign debt serving capacity and fiscal discipline – hopefully the case of Greece, from 2014 and on. The much needed human capital development policies and embedded integrated actions, aiming at boosting the capacity of the system in order to offer reliable, short and long-term lifelong learning and professional development solutions, in a society acutely hit by recession and austerity, correspond to the afore-mentioned structural reforms of the education and training systems. And at the same time, these reforms of the education systems have to be sustainable thus to be interconnected with well-targeted employment and entrepreneurship boosting policies and concrete actions. While time is running fast and policy makers have to deal with persistently tight time limits.

Taking into account the current situation in Greece, as it regards both the education and training and the employment and related social cohesion policies, implementation seems to be well behind the targets as set-out by the objectives of the National Strategic Framework and the corresponding Operational (sectoral) Plans – which are funded by the European Structural Funds. And they are far lagging the hugely increased needs, which are emerging from the prevailing crisis and long-time recession, in terms of both the demand for social cushioning and inclusion services (social cohesion programmes), as well as for the short and long-term increase of the level of transversal competences and of professional skills for growth and development (human capital building).

The already identified and prevailing lack of efficiency of the formal education and training systems, and their effectiveness gap in relation to growth and employment, has been mapped out in a recently delivered report, produced by an OECD led team of experts (OECD 2011, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Education Policy Advice for Greece). The effectiveness gap seems more challenging when measured against the objectives as set out at the European level, in the Europe 2020 and Education and Training 2020. And certainly, when measured against the necessary tasks for the much expected «turning around» quest for the Greek society and economy, in the rather tight and inflexible European environment of the crisis. The OECD Report provides concrete evidence as it regards the long standing inefficiencies of the formal education system (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education) in Greece, more specifically focusing on the recently advocated reforming efforts of the government to up-take the quality of the school education offered to the Greek students. And it is recommending certain actions, referring a number of European cases of «good practice», in order to strengthen and improve the inadequately undertaken system-reforming policies, as well as other complementary measures, which could foster the capacity building dimensions of the effort, thus sustaining change.

It is in such a crisis context, where the European learning innovation legacy is becoming much relevant, with certain challenges at stake, and where all education and social inclusion experts, active at the European level, need to bring up a learning and innovation «task force» - with long-standing and broad-range experience concerning the evolution of the learning systems in Europe and the evidence-based policy making -, in order to get engaged in this titanic effort. An effort undertaken by the Greek authorities and institutions and supported by policy makers in Europe and Member States, as well as other European experts and country representatives. All these actors must join a fast facts-and-problem setting exercise, the definition of priorities and the identification of potential solution providers (in terms of sector/area leading EU countries). While moving into uncharted waters, one could say that the immediate outcome of this problem setting exercise should be a focused and integrated set of actions aiming (a) at a capacity building task, for the Greek institutions to plan, implement and evaluate consistent education and training policy reforms, while (b) delivering concrete, short- to mid-term results, in terms of structural reforms, boosting growth, supporting employment and facilitating social inclusion.



This set of actions should correspond to increased sophistication and adopt an inter-governance perspective, in order to build and effectively implement highly demanding education and training policy reforms, and to deliver both on a short-term and a long-term basis. Such an approach will allow these reforms to bring results, as it regards the learning outputs, in the next three-year period, with measurable up-skilling of human resources, through focused and advanced actions (in terms of delivery and assessment). The reforms should also bring concrete results in terms of the efficiency of the formal education and training systems, their interoperability with the informal learning developments and, certainly, their effectiveness measured against certain employment and growth-underpinning benchmarks.

Based on our experience and understanding, as it regards the prevailing conditions in the Greek education and training system(s), attention should be drawn to the following areas of policy reforms, in terms of their potential social and economic impact, for initiating change with much anticipated results:

- a. Enhance the capacity for formative evaluation and re-organization of the Education and Lifelong Learning Operational Programme, in order to serve as the reliable and delivering policy reforming (& implementation) framework and the one to strengthen education governance practice and institutions.
- b. Selectively introduce sophisticated formative evaluation and impact assessment activities in all the reforming actions, thus boosting the implementation capacity of all stakeholders involved, including education authorities and non-government learning institutions. Certain programmes, especially those opening the formal education systems, bridging formal and informal learning and facilitated pathways between the world of education and the world of work, must be undertaken through Public-Private partnerships and try to engage European stakeholders, in order to consolidate sustainability.
- c. Engage stakeholders in fast-track validation of quality assurance, qualifications and other learning and competences certification schemes, which have to become operational in the next 2-3 year period. This needs full-scale sophistication and open-minded collaborative approaches, with short time schedules. It has to be coupled with a well organised and scalable decentralization of decision making processes, in all formal and informal learning and in other lifelong learning and employability building actions.
- d. Make all education policy reforms relevant to the social inclusion, employability building and/or growth mandates, and sustainable to deliver on a long-term basis.
- e. Reorientate integrated actions, where appropriate, towards demand maturing and driven initiatives, supporting regional, grass-roots driven initiatives, in a broad, pre-defined framework of policy objectives (as in following point).
- f. To this end, maximise engagement of the non-government, private stakeholders, in order to (a) increase relevance of learning across the board towards the social and economic developments and evolutions, (b) facilitate the openness and accountability of all education and training institutions, (c) enhance the innovation and change management capacity and the sustainability of these actors, and (d) introduce co-funding schemes, in the form of PPIs, in order to speed up implementation and performance and provide for long term sustainability and competitiveness of the outcomes.



The above mentioned «territories» for capacity building actions, to be undertaken in the next 12-month period, are setting the scene for the implementation of integrated programs in certain areas of change (innovation). While the definition of these areas may take time, some 6-12 months and contribute to the planning procedures of the next period of the European structural and cohesion framework programme (2014-2020), one has to start implementing with those priorities that can be relevant to the effectiveness upgrade of the running programme and those needs emerged by the system, as detected by the Greek education authorities.

For increasing the long term value of these priorities, European expertise could valorise the short-term needs coming from the Greek authorities, and consolidate certain recommendations for actions which may lead to sustainable results, in line with the long term objectives of the next European framework support period. To this end, we need to take into account the following rather promising priorities:

- ◆ There should be a boost for the increase of supply of high quality flexible learning offers, to various target groups in the Greek society, so that more people have the chance for upgrading their skills in either vocational education or degree programs.
- ◆ In order to deliver, in terms of both growth and social inclusion, this increase of the quality, and the number of, distance and e-learning programs has to be coupled with demand maturing actions, the introduction of qualification schemes and certification procedures, and of the voucher-based subsidisation programs.
- ◆ Finally, it is more than necessary to address the acute problem of youth unemployment and especially the high tertiary education graduates unemployment rate and the related «brain drain» facing the Greek society. To do this, those having the responsibility to support Greece in its drive to fiscal balance and competitiveness, could take the initiative and enhance those actions that cater for sustainable clusters and networks between tertiary education institutions and the industry. It is these clusters that have to be built on open and constructive operational schemes, involving public-private partnerships and deploying the European experience from member states as well as other Europe-wide programs («Knowledge Regions» and «Living Labs»).

Last but not least, in the long-term drive to reform formal education systems, especially the school education, the above points, from (a) to (f), can be of significant help to ensure the effectiveness of such a demanding task.



About the MENON Network

MENON is a European research and innovation network, working since 1999 to foster and smoothen innovation processes in areas related to learning innovation and social capital development in Europe and worldwide. MENON facilitates the understanding of the processes of change happening in society by engaging stakeholders in dialogue processes and by offering evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

The members of the MENON Network are the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (Hungary), the Study Centre on People and Cultures of the Catholic University of Portugal (Portugal), the Institute for Learning Innovation of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany), the Lambrakis Foundation (Greece), SCIENTER (Italy) and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (UK).

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