



ACADEMIC AUTONOMY IN GREEK UNIVERSITIES. A CASE STUDY COMPARED TO EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:

Academic autonomy is a fundamental aspect of university governance, affecting key areas such as student admissions, curriculum design, teaching language, and quality assurance. This paper explores the degree of academic autonomy in European higher education institutions, with a particular focus on Greece. It examines the extent to which universities have control over student intake, admission criteria, and the introduction of new courses. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of governmental regulations on academic decision-making and compares Greece's approach with other European countries. The findings highlight significant constraints on Greek universities in determining student numbers and structuring courses, emphasizing the role of the Ministry of Education in shaping higher education policies.

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1. Introduction

Academic autonomy refers to the degree to which higher education institutions can make independent decisions regarding their core academic functions, such as curriculum development, student admissions, the structure and content of degrees, language of instruction and academic planning, without external interference, particularly from state authorities. It is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of academic freedom and a key driver of quality, innovation, and responsiveness in higher education (Estermann *et al.*, 2011; Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). In the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), institutional autonomy is not merely a desirable trait but a structural prerequisite for universities to effectively contribute to research, teaching, and societal development.

The issue of university autonomy, and particularly academic autonomy, has been central to European higher education reform agendas since the Bologna Process began in 1999. The European University Association (EUA), which represents over 800 universities and national rectors' conferences across 48 European countries, has been instrumental in defining, evaluating, and benchmarking university autonomy. The launch of the *University Autonomy Scorecard* in 2011 and its subsequent updates (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017) have enabled a structured, comparative analysis of autonomy across four dimensions: organizational, financial, staffing, and academic. Among these, academic autonomy remains perhaps the most complex and politically sensitive dimension, as it touches directly on the content and direction of teaching and research.

Greece, despite being an active member of the EHEA, represents a unique and somewhat paradoxical case. On the one hand, it has formally committed to the principles of the Bologna Process, including the promotion of institutional autonomy. On the other hand, it retains a deeply centralized structure of higher education governance, with significant decision-making powers concentrated in the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Stamelos *et al.*, 2015). Greek universities, which operate exclusively as public institutions, have historically had limited autonomy, particularly in academic matters, such as curriculum development, the establishment of new study programs, and the determination of language policies.

The centralization of higher education in Greece is deeply rooted in its political and institutional tradition. Historically, successive governments have exercised tight control over universities, often viewing them as instruments of national policy rather than autonomous academic institutions. As a result, university governance in Greece has been characterized by high levels of state regulation and relatively low institutional discretion. Even in areas traditionally considered the domain of universities, such as the structure of study programs or student selection criteria, ministerial decrees and national legislation prevail over institutional initiatives.

This reality stands in stark contrast with the broader European trend toward greater institutional flexibility and decentralization. Over the past decade, numerous EU countries have introduced reforms to strengthen academic autonomy as part of a broader effort to modernize their higher education systems. These reforms have often been framed in terms of enhancing university performance, fostering international competitiveness, and improving the employability of graduates (Hoareau *et al.*, 2013; Ritzen, 2016). In countries like the Netherlands, Finland, and Austria, for example, universities have been granted significant authority over admissions policies, degree structures, and the internal allocation of academic resources.

Despite this broader European movement, Greece's performance in international comparisons of academic autonomy remains poor. In the EUA's 2017 Scorecard update, Greece was notably absent due to a lack of data submission—a fact that underscores the persistent opaqueness and rigidity of its higher education governance (Bennetot-Privot & Estermann, 2017). Previous EUA reports had already indicated that Greek universities scored particularly low in academic autonomy, especially in areas such as the ability to introduce new courses, choose the language of instruction, and independently determine curricula (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). These limitations are not just bureaucratic hurdles; they have tangible implications for the quality and adaptability of higher education in Greece.

Furthermore, the absence of robust, publicly available data on university autonomy in Greece has made meaningful benchmarking and policy evaluation difficult. While countries across Europe have used the EUA Scorecard as a strategic tool to guide reforms and monitor progress, Greece has largely remained outside this process. This lack of transparency hampers both national and European efforts to understand and improve the state-university relationship in Greece. One of the critical motivations for this study is to fill this gap by offering a systematic attempt to quantify academic autonomy in Greek universities using a methodology aligned with the EUA framework. This research focuses on the academic dimension of autonomy, particularly concerning student admissions, curriculum design, and language policies, during the period following the implementation of Law 4009/2011, which was heralded at the time as a potential turning point in Greek higher education reform. While the law introduced some important changes, such as more flexible governance structures and internal quality assurance mechanisms, its implementation has been inconsistent and often diluted by subsequent legislative amendments.

More recently, debates around university autonomy in Greece have been reignited by emerging challenges such as demographic decline (which affects student intake), digital transformation, and internationalization pressures. In this evolving landscape, academic autonomy is increasingly viewed as essential for Greek universities to remain relevant and competitive. Yet, as in the past, reform efforts continue to face resistance from entrenched interests, both within the state apparatus and within the academic community itself. Many university stakeholders remain wary of greater autonomy,

fearing that it may come with heightened accountability and reduced public funding (Stamelos *et al.*, 2015).

In response to these challenges, this study seeks to provide a dual contribution: first, a qualitative analysis of the academic autonomy of Greek universities considering recent legal, institutional, and political developments; and second, a quantitative attempt to assess the level of academic autonomy using adapted EUA indicators. In doing so, the study builds on previous research on organizational autonomy (Stamelos, *et al.*, 2019), financial autonomy (Stamelos, *et al.*, 2022) and staffing autonomy (Stamelos, *et al.*, 2022) and aims to develop a more comprehensive picture of institutional autonomy in Greek higher education.

The ultimate objective is to inform both academic debates and policy-making processes by providing evidence-based insights into the status, limitations, and potential of academic autonomy in Greece. By aligning the analysis with the EUA Scorecard framework, the study not only facilitates international benchmarking but also contributes to the broader discourse on the modernization of European higher education.

In this research, the academic autonomy of Greek universities remains a contested and under-explored domain. While European trends point toward increased institutional autonomy, Greece continues to exhibit significant constraints and ambiguities. As the pressures of globalization, digitalization, and demographic change intensify, the question of academic autonomy is more relevant than ever. This study, by attempting to quantify the degree of academic autonomy in Greece during the period of the implementation of Law 4099/11, aims to shed light on an issue that lies at the heart of higher education reform—not only in Greece, but across the European Higher Education Area.

2. Sources

This study is based on a comparative analysis of twenty-nine (29) countries (or individual sub-national entities) that participated in the respective research higher education policies in European countries (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Data were collected from official reports by the European University Association (EUA), relevant recent literature, and applicable Greek legislation (Law of the Greek State, 4009/11), along with other national education laws. The four general indicators concerning dimensions of autonomy were agreed upon in the Lisbon Treaty (2007). These indicators are organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy, and academic autonomy. Our methodology complies with the one adopted by the EUA (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). This study examines academic autonomy indicators, including the ability to determine student numbers, admission processes, and the establishment, structure, and content of academic courses (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Pruvot, *et al.*, 2015; Vidal, 2013; Estermann, 2012; Estermann *et al.*, 2011; Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). It is important to note that at this time, it was not possible to collect the data from the questionnaires. Therefore, we quantify the results

from the study of the Greek legislation, analyzing and highlighting both commonalities and discrepancies between European systems and that of Greece.

2.1 Measuring the Academic Autonomy of the Greek Universities

The issue of universities' academic autonomy encompasses matters related to their academic activities. Such matters include student admissions, the establishment, structure and design of study program content, the language of instruction, and quality assurance (Table 1) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

Table 1: General Index of Academic Autonomy

Academic Autonomy
Determination of the number of admitted students
Admission process to higher education
Establishment and organization of study programs
Selection of the language of instruction in study programs
Quality assurance
Design of curriculum

2.1.1 Overall Student Numbers

In most countries, the overall students' number is not determined by universities. In most cases (11 countries), consultations occur between universities and the relevant Ministry to determine the final number of admitted students (Figure 1).

Different cases were observed in Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Netherlands. In these countries, universities had the authority to decide on the overall number of students who would pay tuition fees, while the state determined, without room for negotiation, the number of students who would study free of charge (Figure 1). Through this approach, the government granted universities a limited degree of freedom in deciding on the number of admitted students (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

Even in countries that allowed a high degree of autonomy in determining the number of admitted students, other restrictions were imposed. For example, in Italy, the predetermined student-to-faculty ratio could not be disrupted, in Sweden, there was an upper cap on the number of admitted students in Medicine, Dentistry, and Engineering schools, while in Switzerland, the number of admitted students per faculty was determined based on an assessment of labor market needs in each academic field.

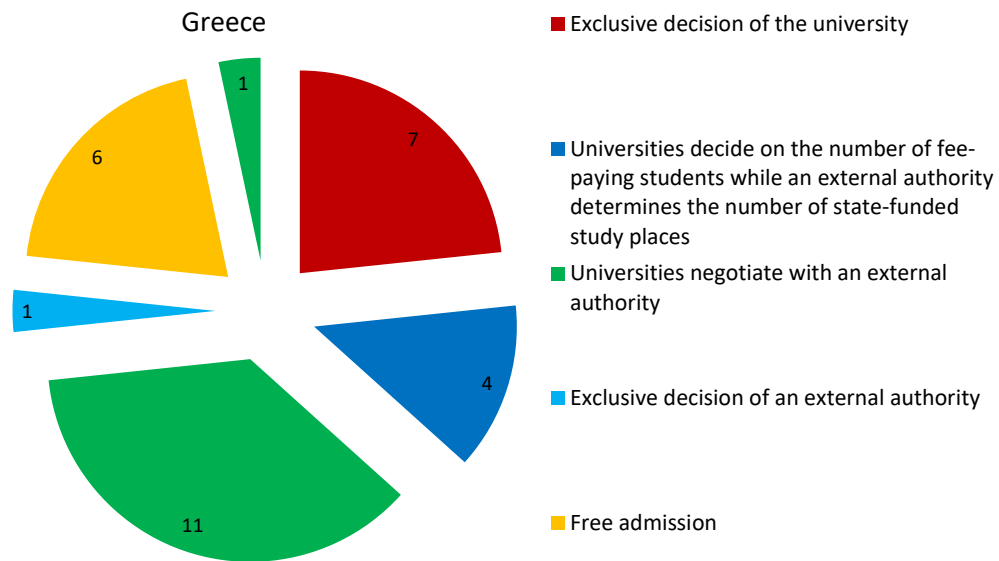


Figure 1: Capacity to Decide on Overall Student Numbers

In Greece, the Ministry of Education is the competent authority that determines the number of admitted students per year and department, considering the country's developmental needs, the infrastructure available at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the coverage of contemporary academic fields, and other relevant factors. The Ministry's procedure for determining the number of admitted students in previous years was as follows:

- 1) A formal request was sent to HEIs, asking them to provide a reasoned opinion on the number of students each department wished to admit per year.
- 2) HEIs then assessed the capacity of each department, justifying the number of students they proposed for admission annually.
- 3) The proposals were submitted to the Ministry for review.
- 4) The Minister issued a decision determining the number of admitted students per department.

It is worth noting that while the Ministry appears to engage in negotiations with universities regarding the number of admitted students per year, this negotiation is purely a formal process. In practice, universities' proposals are not considered, as the Ministry ultimately sets the number of admitted students according to its own decision each year.

2.1.2 Admission Mechanisms

All higher education systems studied required, as a formal qualification, for either the possession of a secondary education diploma or admission through participation in examinations. The admission criteria were explicitly defined in specific legislation. Generally, admission criteria fall into three main categories (Figure 2):

- 1) Criteria determined solely by the university.

- 2) Criteria determined through collaboration between the university and an external authority.
- 3) Criteria determined entirely by an external authority.

More specifically, in Europe, the first case is adopted by nine countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, and Switzerland, while eight countries (e.g., Lithuania, Hungary, etc.) follow the third approach. The most common model is the second one, as in 12 out of the 29 countries, universities, and an external authority collaborate to determine the number of admitted students per academic field (Figure 2) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

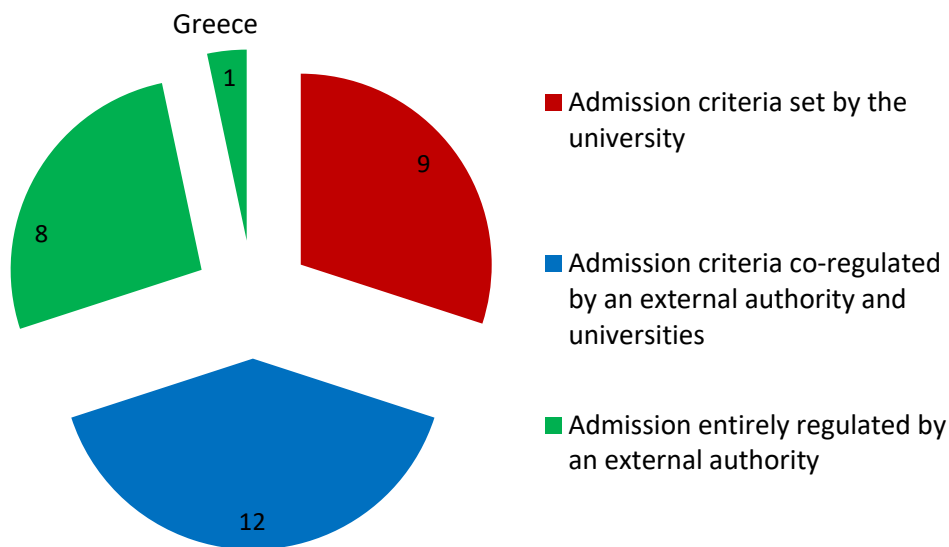


Figure 2: Admission Criteria Setting

In Greece, the **admission criteria for higher education** include obtaining a **high school diploma** and participating in the **national university entrance exams (Panhellenic Exams)**. Candidates must achieve a specific score in the assessed subjects to be admitted to the corresponding **university departments**.

The framework for university admissions in Europe varies for postgraduate studies. In only two countries (Belgium and Switzerland), the state is responsible for establishing the criteria. In contrast, other European countries allow universities a significant degree of autonomy to determine the admission criteria that students must meet to succeed in postgraduate programs (Figure 3) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

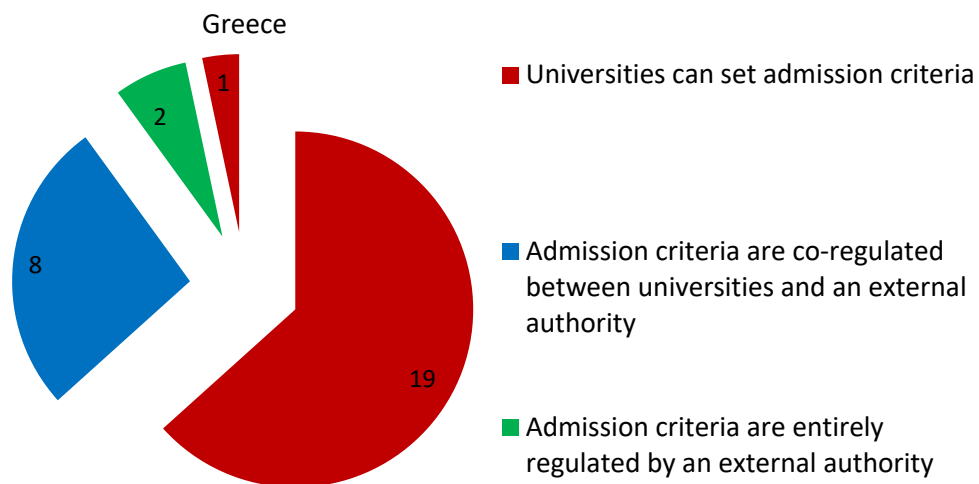


Figure 3: Admission Criteria Setting (MA Level)

2.1.3 Introduction and Termination of Degree Programs

The proposal for the introduction of new study programs, in most cases, requires approval from an external authority, usually by the relevant Ministry (Figure 4). The process of introducing new study programs varies across European countries (Figure 4). Some countries allow universities to establish new study programs in specific academic fields without prior approval from the relevant Ministry (e.g., Finland, Estonia, Iceland, etc.). In other cases, Ministry approval is required, primarily to authorize the corresponding financial expenditure (e.g., Austria, France, the Netherlands, Spain, etc.). The same conditions apply to the introduction of new postgraduate study programs (Figure 4). Differences were observed in the procedures for creating doctoral programs. In Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, universities have full autonomy in establishing doctoral study programs. However, strict requirements exist in universities in Croatia, France, and Spain (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

A significant degree of autonomy is also granted to universities regarding the discontinuation of study programs. A crucial aspect of this process is the provision of alternative options and transitional arrangements to ensure that students already enrolled in these programs can complete their studies.

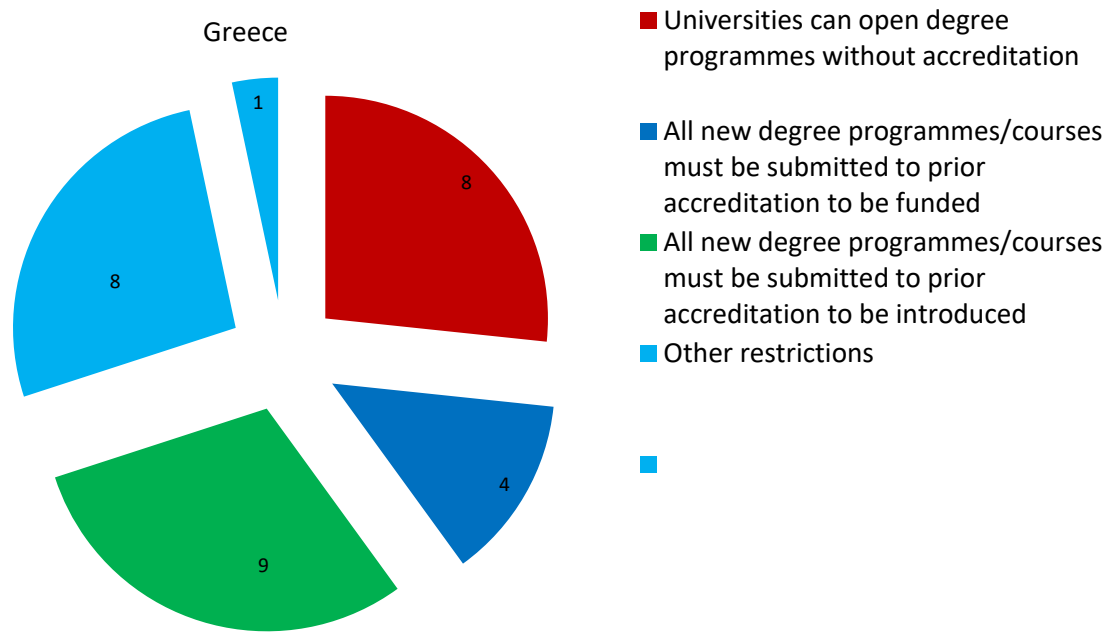


Figure 4: Introduction of New Degree Programs (BA and MA Levels)

Since 2011, Greek universities have been able to freely submit proposals for the introduction of new study programs within their respective departments. However, certain restrictions apply regarding the allocation of credit units per semester and the overall number of students, ensuring that students in each academic cycle accumulate the required number of credits to obtain their degree. Details concerning the organization and operation of study programs are outlined in each institution's regulations.

Specifically,

"By presidential decree, issued on the proposal of the Minister of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs, following recommendations from university rectors, formulated after consultation with the relevant faculties and the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQAA), the total number of credits required for awarding degrees across similar study programs is determined, taking into account developments in each scientific field within the European Higher Education Area."

Additionally,

"Each institution's regulations define the specific organizational and operational aspects of academic cycles, as well as the conditions and requirements for implementing distance learning methods in these programs." (Article 30 of Greek Law, N. 4009/11)

Furthermore,

“The content of study programs is developed by a special committee comprising at least five faculty members from the relevant academic discipline. This committee is formed by the dean and, in the case of an existing program, the department chair. If multiple schools within the same university are involved, the respective deans participate. The program content is approved by the rector following recommendations from the faculty and the university senate. The internal regulations define the composition of the committee, as well as the conditions and procedures for the annual review of study program content.” (Article 32 of Greek Law, N. 4009/11)

In practice, however, the situation in Greece was more complex during this period. The necessity of evaluating all university departments through external assessments conducted by the HQAA led to a broad call for curriculum reforms. Departments were urged to revise existing study programs to align with international standards. The recommendations of the agency effectively forced departments to propose new, more flexible programs with reduced workloads. Failure to comply with these recommendations resulted in programs losing accreditation. The consequences of non-accreditation included reduced institutional funding, restrictions on new student admissions, and denial of research program approvals (Articles 45 and 71 of Greek Law, N. 4009/11).

2.1.4 The Capacity to Choose the Language of Instruction

Most universities (20 out of 29) are free to choose the language of instruction for both undergraduate and postgraduate programs (Figure 5). However, some countries impose restrictions. For example, in France, undergraduate courses must be taught in the national language. In Lithuania, universities have a high degree of autonomy in selecting the language of instruction at any academic level. In Latvia, a limited number of programs can be offered in foreign languages without requiring students to pay tuition fees (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

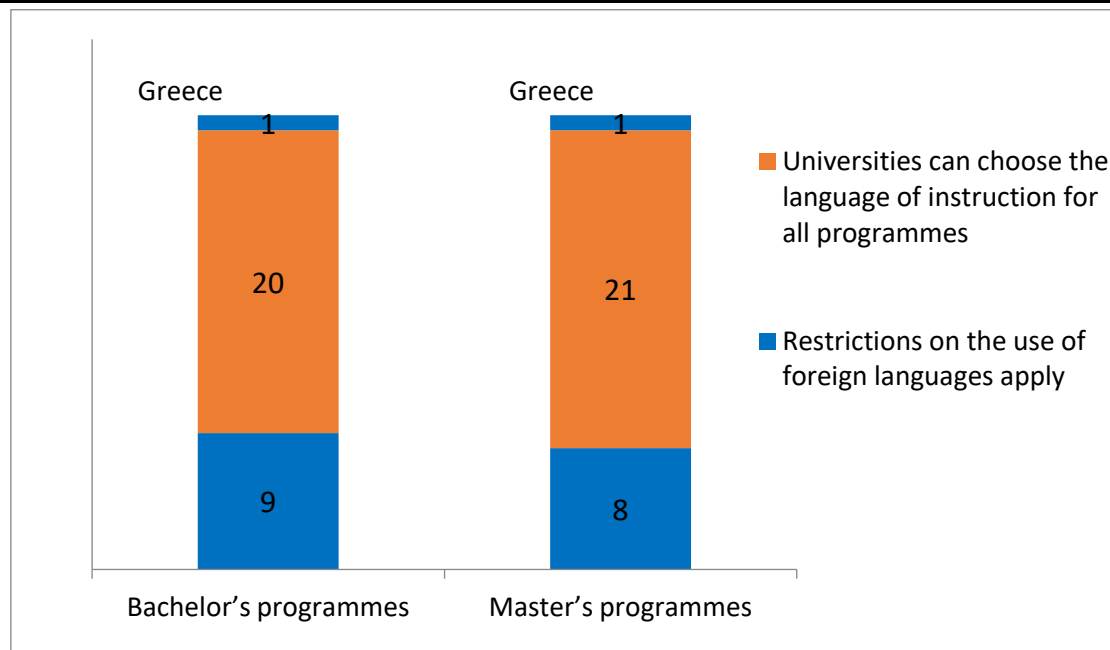


Figure 5: Capacity to Choose the Language of Instruction

2.1.5 The Capacity to Choose the Language of Instruction

In Greece, one year after the enactment of Law N. 4009/11, a new law, N. 4076/12, was passed. Article 5 of this law added a provision to Law N. 4009, stating:

"... From the publication of this law, university departments may independently or jointly organize postgraduate study programs (master's programs) with a language of instruction, in whole or in part, in a foreign language as an exception..." (Article 80 of Greek Law N. 4009/11 & Article 5 of Greek Law N. 4076/12)

Furthermore, in 2014, new legislation was introduced, stating:

"... 11. First-cycle study programs are established in Higher Education Institutions where the courses will be taught entirely in a foreign language. These programs will be open exclusively to foreign students who are neither nationals of an EU member state nor holders of a Greek high school diploma. Foreign students selected for these programs will contribute financially to cover operational costs. A presidential decree will regulate the names of these departments and other relevant issues, including their operation, staffing, admission procedures for foreign students, tuition fees, and other necessary details."

"... 12. At the University of Crete and the University of the Aegean, undergraduate departments in Tourism Studies are established. The University of the Aegean will also offer an undergraduate program in Maritime Studies, and Democritus University of Thrace will offer a first-cycle program in Hellenic Studies, following paragraph 11. The curriculum of these departments will be taught entirely in English. These programs will be open exclusively to foreign students who are neither EU nationals nor holders of a Greek

high school diploma. Foreign students selected for these programs will contribute financially to cover operational costs. A presidential decree will regulate the names of these departments and all operational aspects, including staffing, admission procedures, tuition fees, and other necessary details.” (Article 7 of Greek Law N. 4009/11 and Article 73 of Greek Law N. 4316/14)

Law N. 4009/11, titled “*Structure, Operation, Quality Assurance of Studies, and Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions*”, emphasizes the international role of universities, as engagement with the global academic community is considered essential for the quality, progress, and development of higher education in Greece. Internationalization is also one of the key quality indicators listed in Article 63 of Law N. 4009. It is defined as:

“... the number of foreign students, the number of students attracted through European educational programs, the number of students sent abroad via European educational programs, and the number of cooperation agreements with other higher education institutions in Greece or abroad...” (Article 63 of Greek Law N. 4009/11).

A subsequent law, Greek Law N. 4316/14, introduced articles to develop study programs aimed at promoting the internationalization of Greek universities. The possibility of conducting courses or even entire programs partially or entirely in English was seen as a means of attracting foreign students to Greek universities. Unlike Greek students, foreign students are required to pay tuition fees for their studies. It is worth noting that similar policies are implemented in other European countries (Article 73 of Greek Law N. 4316/14).

2.1.6 Capacity to Select Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Providers

In most European universities, there is no degree of autonomy in selecting quality assurance systems or evaluation frameworks for institutions (Figure 7) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). The only exception is certain universities in Germany, where legislation allows institutions to apply for government approval to modify their evaluation systems and propose their quality assessment indicators. Changes were also recorded in Switzerland’s institutional evaluation system, which was reformed by legislation in 2011 and implemented in 2015. In most other countries, universities do not have the freedom to choose their evaluation framework, although recent years have seen improvements in assessment systems following recommendations from external evaluations (Figure 6) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

For example, in the Netherlands, a new law on institutional quality assessment was passed in 2011 but was implemented with limited success (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

In most of the European universities, there is autonomy to design the content of their degree programs, although there are three (3) universities where external

authorities specify some content of the programs. More specifically, in Italy, there is a high degree of autonomy in universities to schedule their programs, the structure of curriculum, and the educational activities, although the final approval is given by the Ministry of Education. Besides, in Latvia, some restrictions are imposed by the government (e.g., there is a minimum duration of study, compulsory internship, etc.) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

Finally, in Lithuania, limitations were imposed by the quality assurance agency to accredit the programs (e.g., in content, learning outcomes, etc.). Those limitations reduce the degree of autonomy and create problems in the development of innovation and competitiveness of the universities

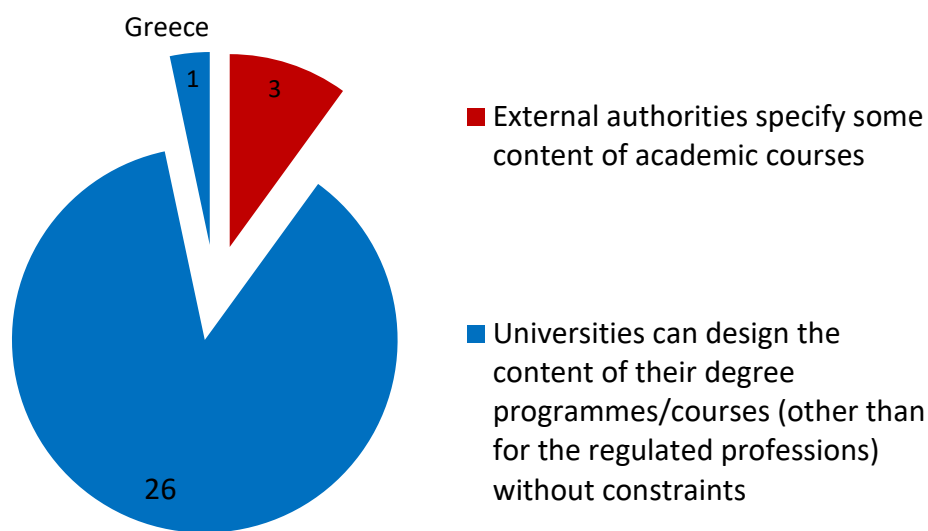


Figure 6: Capacity to Design Academic Content

Regarding the ability to choose the **quality assurance body** for institutional evaluation, there are two general categories:

- In **eight countries**, universities can choose a provider freely according to their needs, including agencies from other countries.
- In the **remaining countries (22 countries, including Greece)**, universities cannot **choose** the quality assurance agency (Figure 7).

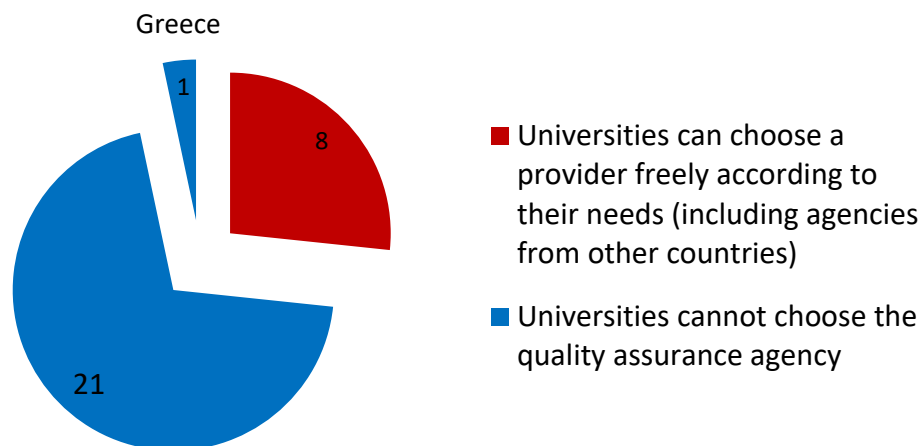


Figure 7: Capacity to Select Quality Assurance Providers

2.1.7 Quality Assurance System in Greek Universities

In Greece, the quality assurance system for universities is managed by the **Hellenic Authority for Higher Education (HAHE)** (formerly **Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency - HQAA**). This is an independent body composed of university and technical education institute professors. The agency operates under the supervision of the **Minister of Education** and aims to provide guidelines for institutions to ensure the correct implementation of the unified quality assurance system applied in Greece (**Greek Law N. 3374/05**). As a result, Greek universities do not have the autonomy to choose their quality assurance system, as it is regulated by HAHE.

Furthermore, in every university in Greece, a **Quality Assurance Committee** is formed following a decision by the university's governing council. This committee consists of the **Rector (or a Vice-Rector)**, **five faculty members**, and **representatives of students and staff**. Its primary responsibility is to monitor **the performance of services, the quality of education, and the university's research output** (Article 14 of Greek Law N. 4009/11).

Each institution's **Internal Quality Assurance Unit (MODIP)** works in collaboration with **HAHE** to ensure the proper organization and coordination of internal and external evaluation procedures. Universities are allowed to **revise their internal quality assurance system** and its implementation procedures following a proposal from the **Rector and approval from the University Council** (Article 14 of Greek Law N. 4009/11).

2.1.8 Study Program Content Design

Most universities (**26 out of 29**) are free to design new degree programs, even for scientific subjects that do not yet exist in the labor market (**Figure 8**). Universities of **Latvia** are an exception, where students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels must first

complete **core scientific studies** before selecting specializations that equip them with skills relevant to **entrepreneurial activities** (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

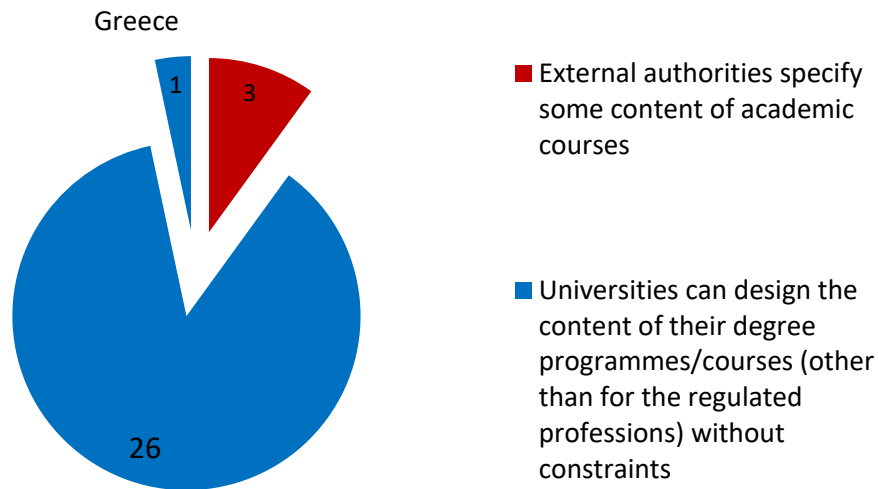


Figure 8: Capacity to Design Academic Content

In Greece, as we mentioned above, the decision to create a new undergraduate Department in Higher Education Institutions belongs exclusively to the government. Each University submits its proposals, through the competent bodies, for the establishment of new Departments or study programs, but the Ministries of Education and Finance approve or reject the respective proposals (articles 5 & 8 of Greek Law N. 4009/11).

Different procedures are adopted for the establishment of new postgraduate study programs. In other words, there is greater autonomy for universities to establish programs in areas that are considered innovative and necessary for the labor market. The increased degree of autonomy observed in the establishment of new Postgraduate Programs is due to the fact that universities are not subsidized with additional credit for the operation of these programs, as it is permissible for students to impose tuition fees. Specifically, according to Article 11 of Greek Law N. 4009/11, the Dean's Office of Postgraduate Studies has in its competence the

"... c) the formulation of an agreement for the approval by the Rector of the postgraduate and, where available, doctoral programs, provided for in Articles 38 and 39, respectively, following a recommendation made by the Deans of the Schools of Undergraduate Studies or by special committees appointed for this purpose..." (art. 11 par. 7c', Greek Law N. 4009/11).

3. An Attempt at the Quantification of the Academic Autonomy of the Universities in Greece

Having presented the conceptual and legal framework surrounding academic autonomy in Greek universities, we now turn to the core objective of this chapter: the quantification of academic autonomy in the Greek higher education system, using a methodology aligned with the standards set by the European University Association (EUA). This effort aims to position Greece in the broader European landscape and to enable comparisons with other national systems in terms of academic self-governance.

The EUA's *University Autonomy Scorecard*, available through its dedicated platform (www.university-autonomy.eu), offers a structured and comprehensive methodology for evaluating and benchmarking the autonomy of universities across Europe. Among its four indicators—organizational, financial, staffing, and academic—academic autonomy is arguably the most closely linked to the pedagogical mission of universities and concerns the degree to which institutions control their academic offer, admission rules, language of instruction, and internal academic structures.

To carry out the quantification of academic autonomy for the Greek case, two distinct but interrelated data components are required:

- 1) **The institutional score for each sub-indicator of academic autonomy**, as defined by the EUA's framework. Each indicator reflects a specific aspect of academic freedom, such as the extent to which universities may introduce new programs independently, set admission criteria, or decide on the structure and content of degrees. These scores are expressed in percentage terms that correspond to specific levels of institutional discretion.
- 2) **The relative importance (weighting) of each sub-indicator**, which determines its contribution to the overall academic autonomy score. These weightings were originally derived from a pan-European survey conducted by the EUA during its 2010 annual conference. Representatives of national university rectors' conferences were invited to assess the significance of each academic autonomy indicator by selecting one of four levels: "very important," "fairly important," "somewhat important," or "not important." The aggregated responses were subsequently transformed into numerical weightings, a process detailed in the research report by Bennetot-Pruvot and Estermann (2017).

The methodology employed in this study replicates this approach, using the EUA weightings as the standard metric for evaluating overall academic autonomy. Each score for Greece under a given indicator is multiplied by the corresponding weighting to produce a weighted score. The final academic autonomy score is obtained by summing all weighted scores, thus yielding a single composite indicator of national academic autonomy.

This process allows for a standardized assessment of the Greek higher education system's academic independence relative to its European peers. The analysis draws on the most recent and reliable data for Greece and applies it across all relevant indicators.

For this purpose, we have consulted national legislation, ministerial decisions, and EUA publications to determine Greece's status on each sub-indicator.

The full matrix used for this calculation is presented in Table 2. This table outlines the following:

- The academic autonomy indicators as defined by the EUA (e.g., ability to design academic programs, set admission requirements, determine teaching language, etc.).
- The corresponding autonomy level for Greece on each indicator.
- The EUA-derived weighting for each indicator.
- The resulting weighted score per indicator.

By applying this structured method, we are able to derive a single, quantifiable score that reflects the current state of academic autonomy in Greek universities. This score is not only valuable for cross-national comparisons but also for evaluating trends over time and assessing the impact of national policy reforms.

It is important to emphasize that this quantification does not merely serve a technical function. Rather, it has significant implications for higher education policy and institutional strategy. A low score may highlight systemic constraints that hinder institutional agility and innovation, while a higher score may suggest a favorable environment for academic development. For countries such as Greece—where the central state has historically maintained strong oversight over university functions—this type of analysis can illuminate areas where further decentralization might be both feasible and beneficial.

Moreover, by anchoring this analysis in the EUA framework, this study gains methodological credibility and international comparability. The consistent use of standardized indicators and weightings ensures that the results can be juxtaposed with those of other European countries, thus contributing to a richer understanding of where Greece stands in relation to the broader trajectory of higher education reform across the continent.

In other words, the quantification presented in this chapter constitutes an essential step toward a more evidence-based and internationally informed discussion on academic autonomy in Greece. By articulating the current position of Greek universities within a European context, this analysis offers valuable insights not only for policymakers and academic leaders but also for international stakeholders interested in the governance of higher education in Southern Europe.

Table 2: Calculation of the degree of Academic Autonomy of the Universities in the case of Greece

Indicator of academic autonomy / Weighting factor	The Case in Greece	Quantification of academic autonomy / Score
Capacity to decide on overall student numbers 14%	Universities negotiate with an external authority	60%
The capacity to select students 14%	Admission is entirely regulated by an external authority	0%
Capacity to introduce and terminate programmes 16%	Other restrictions	60%
Capacity to choose the language of instruction 13%	Termination of degree programmes occurs on the initiative of an external authority	83%
Capacity to select QA mechanisms 15%	Universities cannot choose the quality assurance agency	0%
Capacity to select QA providers 11%	Universities cannot choose the quality assurance providers	0%
Capacity to design the content of degree programmes 16%	Universities can freely design the content of their degree programmes and courses (other than for the regulated professions)	100%
Final weighted score of academic autonomy: $0.14 \times 60\% + 0.14 \times 0\% + 0.16 \times 60\% + 0.13 \times 83\% + 0.15 \times 0\% + 0.11 \times 0\% + 0.16 \times 100\% = 45\%$		45%

4. Ranking and Comparison of Greece with European Countries in Terms of Organizational Autonomy

In Table 2, we calculated the overall degree of academic autonomy recorded for Greek Universities. In Table 3, we can see the rank of Greece in comparison with the other European countries. Therefore, the results show that Greece ranks 25th out of 30 (6th place from the end) and belongs to the 3rd category (medium low level of academic autonomy), with a percentage of 45% (Table 3), while only 3 countries belong to the last, 4th category (low level of academic autonomy) (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

Table 3: Ranking of the European countries
in terms of the general indicator of academic autonomy

Characterization / Percentage clusters	Academic autonomy
	Rank, Country, Score
High level of autonomy 81 – 100 %	1. Estonia, 98% 2. Finland, 90% 3. Ireland, 89% 4. Luxembourg, 89% 5. United Kingdom, 89% 6. Hesse (DE), 88% 7. North Rhine-Westphalia (DE), 88% 8. Brandenburg (DE), 87% 9. Norway, 83%
Medium-high level of autonomy 61 – 80 %	10. Iceland, 78% 11. Denmark, 75% 12. Austria, 72% 13. Switzerland, 72% 14. Poland, 68% 15. Sweden, 66%
Medium-low level of autonomy 41 – 60 %	16. Hungary, 58% 17. Spain, 57% 18. Italy, 56% 19. Slovakia, 56% 20. Portugal, 54% 21. Croatia, 50% 22. The Netherlands, 48% 23. Latvia, 46% 24. Serbia, 46% 25. Greece, 45% 26. Slovenia, 44% 27. Lithuania, 42%
Low level of autonomy < 40%	28. France, 37% 29. Flanders, 35% 30. French-speaking community of Belgium, 32%

From the results of the comparative analysis, several key conclusions emerge. A notable finding is the persistence of a shared pattern among countries that fall within the “medium-low autonomy” category of academic governance. Despite the existence of national specificities and localized historical trajectories in higher education policy (Felt & Glanz, 2002; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013), there remains a striking uniformity in how academic autonomy is institutionally constrained across these systems. In most states categorized under “medium-low autonomy,” state authorities continue to exercise substantial regulatory oversight over core academic matters, significantly limiting universities’ capacity for independent academic decision-making (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Estermann, *et. al.*, 2023).

In contrast, approximately one-third of the participating countries exhibit notably higher levels of academic autonomy. These systems are predominantly clustered within

the “adequate” and “high” autonomy categories—defined by the EUA as allowing institutional self-governance on academic matters in the range of 61% to 100%. Within these systems, universities are generally empowered to determine their academic profiles, develop new programs, and design curricula according to decisions made by their internal academic bodies. Importantly, while some restrictions remain, they tend to concern structural or externally mandated issues—for example, the selection criteria for students, the choice of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, and the selection of QA providers—typically regulated through national legislation (Estermann *et al.*, 2023).

At the other end of the spectrum, the “low autonomy” category—defined by autonomy levels below 40%—contains only a very small number of countries. These systems are characterized by a centralized governance structure that leaves little room for universities to make autonomous academic decisions. According to recent EUA updates, as of 2023, only three countries remain in this category, indicating that most European systems have moved toward greater decentralization, at least to a minimal threshold of institutional discretion (Estermann *et al.*, 2023).

In the Greek context, the legislative reforms introduced by Law N. 4009/2011 were framed as a decisive step toward strengthening institutional autonomy in higher education. However, the empirical evidence suggests that this intention has not been fully realized in practice. While the law marked an important symbolic shift, its actual implementation, particularly concerning academic autonomy, remains constrained. Greek universities continue to operate within a tightly regulated environment in which the central government retains substantial authority over critical academic functions. These include, among others, the design and approval of QA procedures, the designation of QA agencies, and the regulation of admission criteria, especially for undergraduate programs (OECD, 2018). These areas are subject to uniform national standards, often with limited institutional flexibility to adapt policies to local needs or strategic priorities (Kiprianos & Politis-Stergiou, 2016).

This ongoing centralization challenges the spirit of academic autonomy as understood in more liberal governance models and restricts the ability of Greek universities to operate as responsive, innovative academic institutions. The persistence of this model not only affects institutional performance but also limits the capacity of the higher education system to engage dynamically with societal and labor market needs in a rapidly evolving knowledge economy.

5. Limitations of the research – Proposals for further improvement

While the European University Association (EUA) has developed a widely acknowledged framework for assessing university autonomy across Europe (Estermann *et al.*, 2011; Estermann, *et. al*, 2023), certain limitations emerge when this methodology is applied to the Greek higher education context. It is crucial to articulate these methodological constraints, not only to contextualize the findings derived from such

studies but also to inform the design of future research aimed at more accurately capturing national specificities and institutional nuances.

5.1 Inadequate Representation of Greek Contextual Realities

A significant limitation concerns Greece's non-participation in the original EUA autonomy scorecard survey. As a result, Greek representatives were not involved in defining the autonomy indicators or assigning values to sub-indices. Consequently, several unique features of the Greek legal and institutional framework were not reflected in the measurement model. This absence has led to discrepancies between the theoretical autonomy granted by law and the practical autonomy exercised by universities.

A representative case for examining academic autonomy is the indicator concerning universities' ability to determine the total number of newly admitted students. Greece is classified under the category "universities negotiate with external authorities," with a reported autonomy level of 60%. As previously noted, this reflects the legal process by which the Ministry of Education, at the start of each year, asks university departments to submit the number of students they can accommodate for the upcoming academic year. These departmental proposals are compiled by the Senate and forwarded to the Ministry.

In practice, however, these proposals appear to be largely disregarded, as the Ministry typically assigns a significantly higher number of students than what the universities request. Consequently, the reported 60% level of autonomy in this sub-indicator is misleading and does not reflect the actual decision-making power of universities.

This issue is not isolated. Similar discrepancies likely exist in other sub-indicators, where legal provisions for academic discretion are not effectively implemented in practice. Had Greece participated in the original EUA study, national experts could have helped refine the scoring methodology to better capture these implementation gaps, possibly through the development of supplementary sub-indicators.

5.2 Limitations in the Construction and Weighting of Autonomy Indicators

Another methodological concern relates to the construction of the weightings assigned to each autonomy indicator. While these were derived through a structured survey of national rectors' conferences and experts (Bennetot-Pruvot & Estermann, 2017), the sample size—approximately 30 respondents—may be considered insufficient to fully reflect the diversity of institutional contexts across Europe. Although the relative consistency of responses lends to a degree of internal validity, future iterations of the study would benefit from broader stakeholder involvement.

The data used in this study may have some weaknesses, since the data were not collected from questionnaires that had been designed for the needs of this specific research (Painsi, *et al.*, 2025). However, because the important political decisions on university autonomy are expressed through state legislation and apply to all Greek university institutions, they help us to derive reliable results. Furthermore, with

clarifying circulars, the state determines holistically and in detail the way they are implemented.

Specifically, future research efforts should aim for the participation of a wider range of actors, including representatives from national ministries of education, higher education quality assurance agencies, university rectors' councils, and independent academic associations (Painsi, *et al.*, 2025). In the Greek context, organizations such as the Hellenic Authority for Higher Education (HAHE) and the Hellenic Rectors' Conference could play a vital role in offering insights that better reflect the lived institutional realities.

5.3 Rebalancing the Objectives of Autonomy Assessment

The EUA's approach is aligned with broader European policy narratives that position university autonomy as a driver of institutional efficiency, labor market alignment, and competitiveness (European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2022; Choi, 2019). While such objectives are legitimate, the methodology must also acknowledge universities' fundamental role in safeguarding academic freedom and generating public value. As critics have pointed out, an overemphasis on performance indicators tied to market logic risks marginalizing the civic, cultural, and democratic missions of higher education institutions (Stensaker *et al.*, 2022; Choi, 2019).

Accordingly, a more balanced approach to autonomy assessment—one that includes indicators related to institutional support for academic autonomy, social inclusion, and research independence—would align better with the evolving expectations of higher education's role in society.

6. General Trends – Conclusions

Recent developments across European higher education systems reveal a notable progression in the domain of academic autonomy, particularly in areas related to **external quality assurance** (Kelo, 2014), **student admissions** (Greere, 2022) and **program accreditation** (King, 2018). According to the EUA's updated *University Autonomy Scorecard* (Estermann, *et. al.*, 2023), there is a discernible shift toward **institutional external quality assurance (EQA)** mechanisms—such as audits, accreditations, and evaluations—that foster greater institutional control over academic processes.

While **regulation of student numbers** remains prevalent, the governance models adopted across Europe vary widely. Approximately one-quarter of higher education systems maintain **open-access policies**, offering unrestricted admission to all qualified candidates. However, these models are increasingly challenged by limitations in specific academic fields, largely due to budgetary and infrastructural constraints (OECD, 2022). In contrast, another quarter of systems grants **full authority to universities** to determine both study places and admissions criteria, thereby reinforcing institutional discretion. The remaining systems implement **shared governance structures**, where admissions decisions are co-regulated by the state and universities (Reichert, 2019).

At the **Bachelor's level**, institutional autonomy over student selection is relatively limited—present in only about one-third of systems. However, at the **Master's level**, a majority of systems (around two-thirds) allow universities to independently determine admission criteria (Estermann, *et. al*, 2023). In terms of **curriculum development**, most countries require some form of **external approval** for the introduction of new degree programs. Nevertheless, a growing number of systems—especially in Northern and Baltic Europe (e.g., Estonia, Finland, Iceland)—permit institutions to autonomously establish Bachelor's and Master's programs, particularly when these align with pre-approved academic profiles (Painsi, *et. al*, 2025; Kivistö, *et al.*, 2019)

A similar trend is observed at the **doctoral level**, where autonomy is slightly more pronounced. While **quality assurance mechanisms** are expanding in scope, only a minority of countries (slightly over 25%) allow institutions to **choose their own quality assurance providers**, limiting full independence in safeguarding academic standards. In most systems, universities possess the freedom to **terminate programs** without state approval, and over two-thirds are free to select the **language of instruction**, although some countries still impose restrictions, affecting their global attractiveness (Choi, 2019).
The Greek Case: A Divergence from the European Trend

In contrast to the overall upward trend in academic autonomy across Europe, Greece remains within the **“medium-low autonomy” category**, largely due to **persistent state control over key academic functions** (Matei & Iwinska, 2018). Although Greek Law N. 4009/2011 signaled a significant reform effort aiming to enhance university autonomy, implementation has been inconsistent, particularly in the academic domain.

Greek universities do not currently have the autonomy to **independently determine student admissions** at the undergraduate level, as the Ministry of Education retains authority over admission quotas and selection criteria. Furthermore, **quality assurance processes** are centrally governed, with the Hellenic Authority for Higher Education (HAHE) overseeing accreditation standards and evaluations. Universities are not permitted to choose alternative quality assurance providers, which places Greece below the European average in this sub-indicator (Stamelos, *et. al*, 2019).

In terms of **curriculum innovation**, the development and approval of new degree programs—especially at the undergraduate level—must be sanctioned by both HAHE and the Ministry. This contrasts with more autonomous systems in Western and Northern Europe, where internal academic councils often have full authority over program design and implementation.

Additionally, despite legal provisions allowing Greek institutions to introduce **English-taught undergraduate programs for non-EU students**, the **lack of internal regulatory frameworks (e.g., institutional Rules of Procedure)** has rendered such provisions inactive in practice. This discrepancy between legislative intent and operational capacity underscores the need for more coherent policy implementation strategies (Estermann *et al.*, 2023).

7. Conclusion: Towards a Balanced and Holistic Autonomy Framework

The overall trend in Europe suggests a **gradual expansion of academic autonomy**, especially in the context of institutional quality assurance and curriculum development. Nevertheless, the path toward full autonomy is not uniform and heavily depends on **national regulatory cultures, funding frameworks, and the level of trust between public authorities and universities** (European Commission, 2023).

In the Greek context, the gap between formal autonomy and actual institutional practice remains significant. To bridge this divide, Greek universities must be supported not only with **greater legal discretion** but also with **adequate resources and structural reforms** that enable the effective exercise of autonomy. Moreover, a **holistic reform agenda** should integrate academic planning, financial management, governance innovation, and staff development to cultivate strategic institutional autonomy (Tocto-Cano, *et al.*, 2025).

Academic autonomy remains a complex and evolving issue in European higher education. While many universities have a medium degree of control over admissions, curricula, and language policies, state regulations significantly influence decision-making processes.

Greece exhibits a centralized model, with substantial government control over student admissions, quality assurance, and program design. Greater institutional autonomy could enhance the adaptability and competitiveness of Greek universities in the global academic landscape.

Efforts to refine the **EUA Autonomy Scorecard** should continue to account for **implementation capacity, operational bottlenecks, and contextual constraints**, thereby offering a more realistic depiction of the autonomy landscape across Europe.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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