



SOCIAL CLASS, PERFORMANCE IN UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS AND CHOICE OF STUDIES IN GREEK HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The increase in participation in higher education in many countries in recent decades and the fact that more people participate in it has not led to a significant reduction in social inequalities. This is because widened access has been accompanied by a differentiated and stratified higher education sector. Students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds usually study in prestigious higher education institutions and departments which offer high labour market rewards. By contrast, working class students are overrepresented in lower status institutions and departments. In addition, working class students have lower completion rates than students from middle class backgrounds. In this paper, we examine whether these findings apply in the Greek higher education sector with its unique characteristics. We use official data to examine the relationship between students' socioeconomic background and allocation in the different university departments. The research findings show that the Greek higher education sector is stratified by social class, since students with a father who is a higher education graduate or come from professional backgrounds usually attend prestigious university departments such as the Medical or the Law School. On the basis of the research findings, we argue that measures should be taken so that all students, regardless of socioeconomic background have educational qualifications that allow them to enroll at their preferred higher education departments, rather than those available to them due to their performance in university entrance examinations.

Keywords: widening of participation in higher education, social inequalities

1. Introduction

In sociological research, higher education is at the heart of the academic research agenda. This is because in modern knowledge economies, *“economic development depends in part on the presence of an educated and skilled workforce and on technological improvements that raise productivity”* (OECD, 2014:9). In this framework, the official rhetoric holds that education, and especially higher education, contributes to national competitiveness and prosperity.

Researchers who examine higher education and choice of studies in higher education from a sociological perspective have consistently highlighted the barriers faced by students from less privileged social classes (Pugsley, 2004). These barriers include financial constraints and constraints related to lower levels of performance in the university entrance which means that not many choices are available to these students. As a result, despite increased access to higher education institutions in many countries in the past decades, inequalities persist. This means that although widening participation policies have been implemented in many countries, the goal of equity has not been achieved (Brooks, 2004). Research data shows that despite the fact that more people from previously underrepresented social groups enter higher education, such as working class and ethnic minority students, they mostly *“are entering different universities to their middle class counterparts”* (Reay et al, 2005). In this framework, researchers have argued that while many countries have policies for increasing higher education participation, *“only a minority of countries have actually defined participation and attainment targets for specified groups”* (Crosier et al, 2014:5).

Distribution within higher education is correlated with social class. More specifically, middle class students enter higher status universities and university departments that guarantee knowledge and competences necessary for success in high-skill occupations (Eurydice, 2014) and consequently higher future earnings. Working class students, on the other hand, study in less prestigious higher education institutions and course of study. In summary, we now have in many countries, a stratified higher education sector, which serves to reproduce inequalities in higher education.

From a sociological perspective, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has often been used to explain class differentials in the higher education choice process that serves to reproduce inequalities. Bourdieu argues that students’ families’ cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) impact strongly on the choice making process. His theory is as follows. As part of the process of socialization within the family upper and middle class students, children acquire familiarity with the dominant culture that is valued in schools – thus, they have higher academic performance (Bourdieu, 1990).

They gradually develop a certain set of socially grounded dispositions, which he describes as 'habitus', (Bourdieu, 1977; Pugsley, 2004). These dispositions, in turn, define certain sets of actions. For instance, for these students going to university are the norm, a 'taken for granted' decision (Bourdieu, 1990). For these students, attending university is a choice that does not need to be articulated. They only have to choose a higher education institution and course of study. In the choice process they are at an advantage, since they usually have high performance, so many choices are available to them.

Bearing the above discussion into consideration, the aim of this article is to examine a relatively neglected parameter of the admission process in Greece – the applicants' choice of course of study in higher education. While there is a growing body of research on choosing higher education institution, relatively little attention has been paid to the choice process in relation to choice of course of study, so it remains a relatively unexplored aspect of the admission process. The research we present in this article sets out to examine the relationship between performance in university entrance examinations, choice of studies in higher education and social class in Greece.

The reasons that led us to examine this issue were the following. First, the peculiarities of the Greek higher education system and the system for university entrance. In other words, we wanted to examine whether and to what extent research findings that show persistence of social inequalities in higher education despite increased access apply to Greece. In recent decades, there has been an expansion of the higher education sector in Greece, since the number of higher education entrants reached 70,000 in the academic year 2017-18, from 43,000 in 1994. Another reason that led us to conduct this research is related to the characteristics of the Greek educational system, such as the widely spread resort to out-of-school support for the preparation for these highly competitive examinations. These unique characteristics of the Greek higher education sector are described and analysed below.

1.1 The Greek higher education sector

Education in Greece is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry Education and is provided on the following successive levels (Kyriazis and Asderaki, 2008): (a) children attend from 6-12 years of age, (b) secondary education (ages 13-18), which includes lower and upper secondary education, each of which lasts 3 years (c) higher education which consists of two parallel sectors: the University Sector (universities) and Technological Education Institutions.

As regards higher education, it is worth noting the following. First, there are no private higher education institutions, since it is forbidden by the constitution. As a

result, many students who cannot secure a place in Greek higher education institutions choose to study abroad, especially in the United Kingdom. Second, there is a numerous *clausus* policy introduced by the State “*for the allocation of university places*” (Gouvias, 1998:305). Third, access to higher education depends on the results in nationwide entrance examinations organized every year by the Ministry of Education. After the results have been issued, higher education applicants complete a computerized form based on their choices. Finally, since there are few places available, especially for the high status university departments, there is strong competition to secure a place in them. This has the following implications. There is a strong demand and widely spread resort to out-of-school support for preparation in the university entrance examinations. Upper and middle class students are at an advantage, as their families can afford to pay for private tuition which secures a better preparation for the university entrance examinations. In addition, the strong competition means that the few places available for the high status university departments are open only to those with the highest performance in the university entrance examinations.

At this point, it is also worth noting a unique characteristic of the university entrance examinations. Due to the fact that participation in higher education is highly valued in the Greek society, because of its connection with a smooth transition to the labour market and future earnings, most families want their offspring to participate in it. High demand for participation in higher education is attributed to the fact that most people believe in the relationship between a university degree and upward social mobility (Kyridis 2003). The fierce competition for the few places available in prestigious higher education institutions and departments has led to a widely spread resort to out-of-school support for preparation for the university entrance examinations. Most higher education applicants receive private tuition in the form of either organized courses or more costly private tuition. This means that the students’ families economic capital impacts strongly in the admission process. Students from families with higher levels of economic capital can afford the high cost of private tuition, which places them at an advantage in comparison to students from families with lower economic capital.

Having examined the characteristics of higher education in Greece and the value of a university degree, we then present the way this paper is organized. First, the research is presented along with the research limitations. Research findings are then summarized, followed by a discussion and conclusions. Directions for future research are finally discussed.

2. The research study

The above discussion led us to pose the following research question:

(a) Is there a relationship between social class and allocation within the different higher education departments in Greece?

In other words, we wanted to examine whether specific social groups of students (e.g. working class students) are underrepresented in some university departments. If research findings show that there are great differentials concerning distribution in the different university departments, this means that the higher education sector is stratified in Greece. This issue is important, since a stratified by social class higher education sector means that the increased participation in higher education has been accompanied by stratification within it, which contributes to the persistence of social inequalities.

Data was obtained from the Hellenic Statistical Authority which collects data from all first year students who enter higher education. A questionnaire is administered to all first year students who complete it upon registration. To assign social class we used parental occupation with the standard occupational classifications: professional, intermediate, skilled non-manual, skilled manual, semiskilled and unskilled, since they are often used in research studies examining this issue (Allen and Storan, 2005; Alcott, 2016). In accordance with other studies examining similar issues, we have also used parental education level (Reay et al, 2005).

It is also worth noting a limitation of the research. The fact that it employs only quantitative research methods and the fact that qualitative research, which emphasizes *“the meaning that key players attach to various acts”* (Pugsley, 2004:8) has not been employed, means that care should be taken in generalizing the research findings.

3. Research findings

The research findings are presented using father’s occupational classification and father’s education level.

3.1 Father’s education and choice of course of study

In this part, we present the findings concerning the relationship between father’s education and choice of course of study in higher education. As we have already described, we use official data to examine this relationship. We present data from ten university departments from three higher education institutions: the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA), the National Technical University of Athens (NTUoA), and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (UoTh), the two biggest higher

education institutions in Greece. We chose the university departments described below since we wanted to present data from departments with great differences as regards performance required to secure a place in them. More specifically, we have chosen five high status university departments that require high performance in the university entrance examinations. These departments are: the Medical and the Law School in both higher education institutions and the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering in the National Technical University of Athens. In relation to lower status university departments, which do not require high levels of performance in the university entrance examinations, we chose the following departments: from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the School of Theology, the School of Primary Education, the School of Geology and from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens the Faculty of Theatre studies and the Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment. To illustrate the different admission performance required in these university departments we present the minimum grade in the university entrance examinations to secure a place in these departments for the academic year 2016-17 (table 1). The maximum points an applicant can achieve in the university entrance examinations are 20,000.

Table 1: Minimum grade in the university entrance examinations to secure a place by university department

University department	Minimum grade (points) required
Medical School, UoA	19,063
Law School, UoA	18,229
School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, NTUoA	18,628
Medical School, UoTh	18,964
Law School, UoTh	17,938
School of Theology, UoTh	11,275
School of Primary Education, UoTh	13,595
School of Geology, UoTh	12,991
Faculty of Theatre Studies, UoA	13,333
Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment, UoA	13,468

The data presented above show that students who attend the Medical and the Law School in both higher education institutions, and the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering in the National Technical University of Athens have achieved very high grades in the university entrance examinations. Thus, when, after the results have been issued, they complete the computerized form, they have many choices, due to their high performance in the entrance examinations. By contrast, students in the School of Theology, the School of Primary Education, the School of Geology and from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens the Faculty of Theatre studies and the

Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment have achieved much lower grades. For them, choosing the university department is a completely different choice. Fewer choices are available to them, since they have achieved low grades in the university entrance examinations. These students often do not study in their preferred department, but in those available to them due to their performance in the university entrance examinations. Bearing the above into consideration, the question that springs to mind is: What is the social composition of these university departments? We then present the composition of these university departments by father's education level for the academic year 2014-15 (table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of students with a father who is a higher education graduate or has postgraduate studies by university department

University department	%
Medical School, UoA	72.86
Law School, UoA	68.36
School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, NTUoA	78.27
Medical School, UoTh	76.41
Law School, UoTh	68.36
School of Theology, UoTh	25.8
School of Primary Education, UoTh	41.03
School of Geology, UoTh	47.36
Faculty of Theatre Studies, UoA	42.37
Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment, UoA	45.76

In sum, the above data show that these university departments have completely different student composition in relation to the level of father's education. The majority of the students in the Medical and the Law School in both higher education institutions and the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering in the National Technical University of Athens have a father who has participated in higher education or has completed postgraduate studies. By contrast, most students in the School of Theology, the School of Primary Education, the School of Geology and from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens the Faculty of Theatre studies and the Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment have a father with no experience of participation in higher education. In the next part, we present the data in relation to father's occupation and choice of course of study.

3.2 Father's occupation and choice of course of study

In our study, we also examined the relationship between father's occupation and choice of course of study for the academic year 2014-15. The results are presented below (table 3).

Table 3: Percentage of students with a father who belongs to the higher occupational categories by university department

University department	&
Medical School, UoA	56.2
Law School, UoA	42.5
School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, NTUoA	49.2
Medical School, UoTh	53.77
Law School, UoTh	50.77
School of Theology, UoTh	19.2
School of Primary Education, UoTh	35.2
School of Geology, UoTh	24.5
Faculty of Theatre Studies, UoA	27.11
10) Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment, UoA	28.8

The data presented above show that these university departments have completely different student composition in relation to the occupation of the father. More specifically, the percentage of the students in the Medical and the Law School in both higher education institutions and the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering in the National Technical University of Athens have a father who belongs to the higher occupational categories (higher managerial or professional) is quite high. By contrast, most students in the School of Theology, the School of Primary Education, the School of Geology and from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens the Faculty of Theatre studies and the Faculty of Geology and Geoenvironment have a father who belongs to the lower occupational category (skilled manual, semiskilled and unskilled).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The official rhetoric that accompanies initiatives for increased participation in higher education argues that the development of quality mass higher education systems is necessary for competitiveness in knowledge-based societies and for social inclusion reasons (Crozier et al, 2014). The above findings provide strong evidence that, contrary to the official rhetoric, increased participation in higher education, does not necessarily lead to a reduction in social inequalities and social mobility. If the expansion of the higher education sector is followed by stratification within it, it can lead, as the research data we have presented show, to the reproduction of "*established class relations*" (Shiner

and Noden, 2015:1171) and the persistence of current forms of privilege for some social classes (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

The research question we posed was whether there is a relationship between social class and allocation within the different higher education departments in Greece. The findings we present show that the university department students choose is correlated with father's education level and occupation. These findings also show that the higher education sector in Greece is highly stratified. We may have increased participation, but students from different social classes attend different higher education departments.

How can these class differentials as regards distribution to different higher education departments be explained? On the basis of the research findings and the characteristics of the Greek education system, we can identify the following reasons that are related to the higher education choice process. Research findings provide strong evidence that the process of choosing a higher education department and course of study is a different process from families from different social classes who possess differential levels of cultural, social and financial capital. The context of higher education in each country also impacts heavily on the choice process. These factors are analysed in the discussion that follows.

First, the system for university entrance in Greece, which means that entry to higher education departments in Greece, depends on performance in higher education entry examinations held at the end of each school year in June. Research has already established that students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds perform better than working class students. They have higher performance in primary and secondary education and, consequently, in the nationwide university entrance examinations. Their high performance provides them with a wide array of higher education choices, so they usually choose high status departments. Their choices are in accordance with "the dominant value of the Greek society of an elite university degree as a means of safeguarding against downward social mobility and guaranteeing upward mobility" (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2009:733). With the increased participation in higher education in Greece, people from privileged social classes do not simply seek participation in higher education, but studies in elite higher education university departments that can guarantee their current social status and/or provide them with opportunities for upward social mobility (Maloutas 2007). Similar findings have been found elsewhere, since research has shown the middle class strategies in choosing elite higher education institutions and courses of study for the reproduction of their social advantage, the maintenance of a privileged social position or upward social mobility (Voigt 2007; Crozier et al., 2008). Working class students, on the other hand, have lower

performance levels in the higher education entry examinations, which mean that they can choose to study in departments which do not require high admission scores. These students and their families want a university degree to safeguard against downward social mobility. Their strategy is, primarily, to avoid unemployment, since they are also aware of the material constraints (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). In Greece, there are no tuition fees, but students usually study away from their place of residence, which means that they have to pay for accommodation, food and transportation.

A second factor that impacts on choice of studies in higher education relates to the student families' cultural and social capital and habitus. As we have seen, most students in the high status higher education departments have a father who has participated in higher education. These families are, consequently, aware of the way the higher education sector works, so they can make informed choices. They draw on their cultural and social capital in order to seek information about institutions and courses using hot and cold knowledge sources (Ball and Vincent 1998). Familiar habitus creates certain dispositions (Bourdieu 1977) and impacts on the choice process, providing families from higher social classes with a sense of ambition and security. In addition, young people have expectations that are correlated to what is acceptable 'for people like us' (Bourdieu 1990, 64–65), so, for, instance, choosing the Medical School is a natural progression for them, part of a '*normal biography*' (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). Working-class families with lower levels of economic, social and cultural capital usually have less and choices available to them. As a result, there are fewer choices available to them.

Implications for policy makers are clear. Any attempts and initiatives aiming at overcoming inequalities in higher education need to focus on inequalities in relation to school performance, in lower levels of education (primary and secondary education). In addition, researchers should study the general financial and societal context in which the choice is made (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). This is because education is a social institution which reflects the characteristics of the society, and in particular, the structure of the national labour market and the economic conditions within which choices are made.

To sum up, based on the research findings we have presented in this paper, we can convincingly argue that increased access to higher education does not automatically entail widening of participation within it. Implications for policy makers are clear. Initiatives to widen access should aim at providing all students, regardless of social class with performance levels that give them the opportunity them to study at the higher education institutions and departments they prefer, instead of those available to them as a result of performance in university entrance exams. There is a pressing need to enact policies in order to provide opportunities for under-represented groups to

access the higher education institutions and courses of study they prefer, and not those that they are obliged to choose on the basis of the socially based obstacles and barriers we have described in this paper.

About the author

Iakovos Tsiplakides holds a PhD in Sociology of Education from the Department of Philosophy, Education and Psychology of the University of Ioannina, Greece. His research interests include inequalities in higher education, choice of studies in higher education, the digital gap and student retention.

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