



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ  
Α.Δ.Ι.Π.  
ΑΡΧΗ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ & ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ  
ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΝΩΤΑΤΗ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ

HELLENIC REPUBLIC  
H.Q.A.  
HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE  
AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY

## QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HQA)

### OPINION ON THE 'ATHENA' PLAN

The HQA acknowledges the determination of the Ministry of Education to take initiatives under the 'Athena' Plan in order to streamline the Greek academic map as a response to the way it has developed over the past twenty-five years, without scholarly and developmental criteria, as was stressed to the Greek Parliament in the Annual Reports of the HQA for the years 2010, 2011 and 2012.

The HQA relayed to the current political leadership of the Ministry of Education, immediately after it assumed its responsibilities, its opinion that the most urgent issue in the country's Higher Education system concerns its organisational restructuring, which will lead, on the basis of commonly accepted criteria, to a consolidation of its units, a strengthening of its potentials, and the freeing up of its dynamism. The initiative taken by the Ministry is therefore welcome.

Despite the chronic procedures, which impede its smooth administrative operation, the HQA, as guardian of quality assurance in Higher Education, in its informal meetings defined criteria and regulations in accordance with the existing legislation, which should form the basis for the development of the 'Athena' Plan. The related document entitled 'Redrawing the map of Greek Universities: outline of a methodological approach' was submitted to the Ministry on 30-11-2012 (attached). Moreover, beyond this, the Agency, if requested, can partake in the quantification and assessment of the aforementioned criteria and apply them to the network of Greek Universities. It can even study and prepare a complete draft plan that could be used as a starting point for encouraging further discussion of the issue.

The following observations summarise the HQA's opinion on all the proposals suggested by the leadership of the Ministry of Education under the Athena Plan.

### **1. General Observations**

1.1. The general goals of the Athena Plan for the creation of hubs of excellence, achieving economies of scale, promoting research and innovation and the development of competitive human resources within the European Area through the merger of institutions and academic units with similar academic disciplines are undoubtedly right.

The achievement, however, of these objectives, requires:

- a) the existence of a national strategy for setting development goals, which does not exist, and

b) the existence of a national strategy for research and innovation, which also does not exist, while the research funding has been constantly declining the last decade.

1.2. The 'Athena' Plan is not accompanied by a detailed consideration of the approach to the problem, offering targets and a methodology by which they could be achieved. The criteria and accompanying measures proposed by the HQA, some of which are cited in its letters to the Ministry on the expression of an opinion, do not appear to have been adopted or applied consistently and universally. Consequently, the proposed Plan covers only a small part of the interventions that the country's HEIs need and, most importantly, is not part of a well-structured and comprehensive reform plan. As each reform - and especially in the field of higher education - inevitably implies adverse effects, on a small or large scale, on those involved, it would be appropriate to consider whether the overall benefits achieved by the proposed plan will offset these effects in order to avoid the risk that the plan may turn out to be another 'lost opportunity'.

1.3. The whole attempt to produce the plan is not characterised by a unified application of the criteria. The estimated increase in the number of students at university and their reduction in the TEIs does not seem to contribute to improving the quality of HEIs nor to serving the needs of the country.

1.4. A long-term plan for redrawing the HEI map must serve national development goals and be harmonised with the country's education, and research and innovation strategy. Given the lack of a clearly formulated document for a national research and innovation strategy and national development goals, the HQA believes that the preparation of a plan for restructuring the HEIs should begin answering the central question: '*How many HEIs does the country need?*', which currently remains unanswered. The proposals of the Athena Plan lead to only a small reduction in the actual number of institutions, from 40 to 34. The consistent application of the criteria, however, would show that the proposed Plan for reducing the number of Universities in the country is not as bold as is needed.

## **2. Institutional level**

2.1. Regarding the merger of institutions, we believe that in principle the Athena Plan is right, but the implementation should be extended even to those institutions which do not fulfil the conditions set by the HQA as regards the number of academic units and students. It is also noted that in general the situation arising after the proposed merger still does not meet the necessary criteria, range of disciplines and spatial dispersion. The HQA may, if requested, prepare alternative plans that would meet the criteria and will best serve the overall objectives of the Plan. It is also available to the State to find in each case the best solution in collaboration with universities.

2.2 The objective of the federal University 'Adamantios Korais' according to the 'Athena Plan' is to become a hub of excellence, to achieve economies of scale and to respond to the development priorities of the country. But, the 'Athena Plan' retains the same irrational philosophy as in the current situation, since it keeps intact the Athens University of Economics, Panteion University and the University of Piraeus, despite the great affinity of their disciplines (and despite the fact that significant economies of scale could be achieved through the merger of similar and related academic units). The HQA believes that the overall administration of the federal University 'Adamantios Korais' will actually have a loose



relationship with the competitive, in terms of disciplines offered, institutions and few opportunities for effective intervention. The concept of a federation will create further bureaucratic irregularities and costs without the corresponding academic benefits.

### **3. Level of academic units/departments**

3.1 As for the more general issue of the merger and closure of departments, particularly as regards the merger of departments with similar subjects, this is predominantly an academic issue and should be primarily the responsibility of the HEIs. The ‘Athena’ Plan, however, proceeds with numerous mergers and closures of departments without even having taken into account the academic requirements, economies of scale and obvious national development objectives.

3.2 An unevenness is observed in the application of academic criteria between the Institutions of the regions and the centre, as well as between universities and Technological Educational Institutions. In this way, technological academic units in the centre, which fulfil the criteria, are being closed or merged while regional academic units are continuing, often as annexes, yet they do not fulfil most of these criteria. Also, both in the centre and in the regions university academic units are being preserved that, in almost all cases, are identical.

3.3. In the first draft of the ‘Athena Plan’ the absence of data was problematic for the necessary transitional regulations for its implementation. On this subject, according to the view of the HQA, a smooth transitional period should intervene during which the academic unit will not accept new students, and will work with those it has until their graduation and prepare for its future development according to the Plan. The HQA notes with satisfaction that this issue has already been addressed in the second draft of the Athena Plan, released on 6 March 2013.

### **4. Conclusions**

4.1. The absorption of departments, as foreseen in the ‘Athena Plan’, although it appears to be in the right direction, cannot be commented upon effectively because of structural deficiencies which remain in the system of HEIs after the implementation of the Plan. Interventions should be made to the whole of the reception system of the Departments before any absorptions, closures or foundations of Departments and their locations are decided upon. The ‘Athena Plan’ was developed around the central idea of neutralising the multi-fragmented nature of the academic framework with synergies and mergers, to face the challenges of the future with the ability to achieve distinction and, ultimately, excellence. Yet the whole Plan preserves a non-rational arrangement and a weakening of academic potential. As for reducing the number of departments, although desirable this cannot be a purpose in itself and will not produce the expected results if the network of Institutions is not ‘battle ready’ with structural and operational viability.

4.2. Key issues should be addressed in advance, or even during the preparation of the plan, as stressed by the HQA, such as clarifying the mission and role of the Technological Educational Institutions as pillars of Technological Education, the completion of the National

Qualifications Framework and the rationalisation of the number of students and future employees. We note that the country has one of the lowest ratios of graduates to incoming students. Decisions on the above issues would facilitate the introduction of separate educational paths in post-secondary higher education, as alternatives to the current 'one way system' of secondary education graduates, and would offer healthy solutions to any interventions for restructuring HEIs.

4.3. It is difficult for the HQA to assess the socio-economic impacts of the Athena Plan, given the magnitude of the social repercussions, over time and geographically, but also because of the lack of strategic objectives, which define the basis of evaluation. The current financial savings foreseen in higher education with the implementation of the Plan are likely to be very small, since the number of students and professors does not differ significantly. Consequently, the expected reductions in funding will not be offset by the corresponding cost reductions, but will lead to a decline in the financial reserves of institutions and a reduction in services.

4.4. In conclusion, the HQA believes that the 'Athena Plan', as proposed by the Ministry, is a first step in the right direction, but with many weaknesses, the main one being the non-uniform and inconsistent application of criteria, which is a prerequisite for ensuring the consent and active participation of institutions. The HQA believes that it is necessary for the State to finalise as soon as possible an overall plan based on the criteria that have been set, which can be implemented in stages if necessary. The HQA will assist the state with documented instructions in the on-going effort to restructure the map of Higher Education

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