

OPINION OF THE HQA ON THE ‘ATHENA PLAN’
for the restructuring of Higher Education Institutes

1 Introduction

This opinion concerns the so-called ‘Athena Plan’, which was submitted to the HQA with document number 1257/6-2-2012 of the Ministry of Education and is submitted in accordance with the relevant provisions of Law 4076/2012. It should be noted that the aforementioned plan is not accompanied by any ‘special documentation’ as is explicitly foreseen in the aforementioned law. Instead, the letters requesting an opinion from the HQA contain only a table of criteria, some of which are goals, while there is no mention of if and how they were selected nor of any of their quantitative characteristics. A PowerPoint presentation of the Plan was made public, although also without any documenting text. It is obvious that the lack of documentation greatly complicates the formation of an opinion on the Plan.

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 to a consolidation of its units, a strengthening of its potentials, and the freeing up of its dynamism on the basis of commonly accepted criteria. The initiative taken by the Ministry is, then, to be welcomed. In this context, the HQA participated only in an initial information meeting (19/10/2012) with the Ministry, while it did not have significant participation in the writing of the Plan nor any information on its writing. The results of the Plan were presented only to the President of the HQA prior to its publication.

The HQA, aware of the difficulties as well as the scope of the effort, submitted to the Ministry (30/11/2012) a concise five-page report with an outline description of the methodological approach and four basic criteria which should be taken into account during the preparation of the plan, their sub-criteria, and two additional interventions that should be urgently considered and incorporated into the Plan. During the submission of the Report to the Administration, the plea was expressed in writing that HEIs be notified of its content so that they could send comments to the HQA. There was no response to this suggestion from the Ministry.

Beyond this, the HQA was heavily involved with the quantification of the criteria that were mentioned and their implementation on the network of the country’s HEIs, so that they could express an opinion on this subject in a manner corresponding to the seriousness of the issue, which will greatly define the future of higher education and the country in general. It also supplied the Ministry, on its request, with a great deal of processed quantitative and qualitative data on the country’s HEIs in a 460-page report.

As can be seen, there were no preceding negotiations on the Plan between the Ministry and the HQA and it is thus somewhat of an exaggeration to claim that, ‘...negotiations, a dialogue with the HQA preceded on the criteria for merging and redrawing the academic map,’ as appears in the PowerPoint presentation of the Plan. Beyond this, the whole production of the Plan is marked by shoddy preparation without a structured background, quantification or a unified application of the criteria given in the documents requesting an opinion. These weaknesses were exacerbated, we believe, by the exceptional pressure posed by the limited timeframe for preparing the Plan. On this point, the HQA had stated, during its meeting with the Ministry (19/10/2012), that the proposed timeframe was suffocating for such a grand reform plan and that the related changes to the ‘computerised form’ for entry to the HEIs should be expected by March 2014.

2 General observations

- 2.1.** The so-called ‘Athena Plan’ is not accompanied, as mentioned, by a detailed consideration of the approach to the problem, offering targets and a successful methodology. The criteria and accompanying measures proposed by the HQA, some of which are given in its letters to the Ministry on the expression of an opinion, do not appear from the results to have been adopted or applied consistently and universally. Consequently, the proposed Plan covers only some of the interventions that the country’s HEIs need and, most importantly, does not constitute a – even small – subset of a solidly founded and articulated plan. This is of particular importance, in our opinion, because the implementation of the Plan in question, as well as any other plan for the redrawing of the map of the country’s HEIs, will unavoidably result in negative ramifications, on a small or large scale, for those involved. As such, it is necessary to balance these ramifications with the general benefits that will accrue, and for which reason there should be at least something of a coherently structured proposal for upgrading the organisation of the country’s HEIs so that the effort does not risk being yet another ‘lost opportunity’.
- 2.2.** Major issues that were noted by the HQA should be settled in advanced of, or at least alongside, the preparation of the Plan, such as clarifying the mission and role of the Technological Educational Institutions (TEI), strengthening post-high school non-tertiary education and the rational management of the number of students and future workers. We believe that technological education should aim at being, in accordance with its initial philosophy, a strong bastion of technological education and not a bad copy of university education, as appears to be happening. Moreover, it must be noted that the country has one of the lowest ratios of graduates to incoming students. Decisions on these issues would enable the introduction of alternative educational routes to today’s almost ‘one-way system’ of secondary education graduates, and would offer healthy solutions to any Plan for reorganising the HEIs.

2.3. Many important aspects of the Plan, such as the ‘Adamantios Korais’ federal university, need clarifying so that an informed opinion can be given. A similar lack of information concerns the necessary transitional regulations for the implementation of the Plan. On this issue, the view of the HQA is that there be, depending on the situation, a fixed period of smooth transition to the final goal, during which the academic unit will not accept new students, and will operate with those it has until their graduation and prepare its future development according to the Plan.

3 HEI system on a national level

3.1 A grand plan for redrawing the HEI map must serve national development goals and be harmonised with the country’s educational, research and innovation strategy. Given the lack of information noted in the Introduction (§1) and from a general examination of the Plan, it does not appear to be part of a broader national-level plan. The HQA is also not aware of the existence of national development targets explicitly stated in a recent document, so as to be able to assess the integration of the Plan under discussion into the targets. Similarly, we are not aware of any text for a national research and innovation strategy. The most relevant documents that the HQA has available to it, which of course do not cover the desired targeting nor do they have the necessary government approval, appeared approximately a decade ago. Given the above weaknesses the central question remains unanswered: ‘How many HEIs does the country need?’ The Plan should have started by answering this question – something which did not happen, judging from its presentation.

3.2 The Plan proposes to reduce the number of Institutions from 40 today to 33. In principle, this is a positive step for reasons put forward by the HQA both in the text on the Criteria mentioned in the Introduction (§1) and its annual reports (2010, 2011, 2012) to the Parliament of the Hellenes. These reasons are also given in the publicised PowerPoint presentation of the Plan under review. Yet, this reduction seems anaemic in light of the problem being treated and international experience, while uniform criteria do not appear to be being followed for all Institutions.

3.3 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 which 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.

3.4 The HQA, in its role for increasing the quality of higher education and the relative assistance that it offers the Administration, has worked systematically to redraw the HEI map and has already prepared a draft plan, as mentioned in

the Introduction. Given the lack of a central strategy and so as to answer the central question (§3.1) the HQA has applied criterion K2 on spatial distribution (see the attached document ‘Redrawing the map of Greece’s HEIs’, 30-11-2012) based on the demand for easy access for the population, on the level of administrative region, to at least one HEI and the distribution of Institutions in relation to population density. A combination of these two demands leads to a reduction of almost 50% in the number of Institutions, a result that matches international practice and even with one of the higher numbers of HEIs. It should be noted that the growth trend for HEIs is increasingly based on the interaction between academic fields through a corresponding osmosis of professors and students – a demand that leads to a larger, as in the past, ‘minimum HEI size’. The results of this exercise confirm that the reduction of the number of the country’s HEIs as proposed in the Plan is not as bold as is needed.

4 Institutional Level

4.1 As mentioned, on the Institutional level the criteria for the size of an Institution (K1) and spatial arrangement (K2), along with the corresponding sub-criteria, do not appear to have been implemented in full. The implementation of a model for restructuring HEIs into Schools (e.g. ≥ 3) with a minimum number of Departments (e.g. ≥ 10 in total and ≥ 3 or 2 per university or TEI School) offers a first picture of the interventions necessary. Moreover, a corresponding criterion for the number and size of annexes (e.g. one annex maximum for an HEI the size of at least one School) illustrates the significant problem of the dispersal of academic units and the measures that should be taken. These measures must include the possibility of creating other educational routes through two-year and three-year programmes under the supervision of the corresponding HEI and in combination with the quality and infrastructure of the academic units in question (criteria K3 and K4). One element that needs to be checked quantitatively is the non-violation of the capacity of the campus or the annex of the HEI (see criterion K2).

4.2 The Plan proposes the mergers of the University of Macedonia of Economic and Social Sciences with the University of Western Macedonia into a new University of Macedonia. Although this proposal is in the right direction, in keeping with the above, we believe that it does not cover, marginally, the criteria of natural size and breadth of subject areas. Attention should also be given to the existence of a Department with no faculty or research staff. An alternative proposal for negotiation would be the unification of the aforementioned universities and the TEI of Western Macedonia into a new University of Western Macedonia (based in Kozani). A further advantage here is the merger of the two technology departments of today’s University of Western Macedonia with those of the TEI and the more rational integration of all the Department into Schools. It should be noted that the HQA believes that

in certain situations and under strict preconditions of quality and size, the merger of universities with TEIs can be of benefit to the two (or more) HEIs which are merging.

- 4.3** The Plan proposes the closure of the University of Central Greece and the absorption of the Department of Regional Economic Development by Panteion University and the Department of Computer Science and Biomedical Informatics with the University of Thessaly. We believe that this proposal, although it is in the right direction in accordance with the above, should be amended as regards the absorption of the Department by Panteion University. This amendment is necessary as we believe that the host University may not be viable if it remains as is, both from the perspective of size and from the perspective of subject areas. It is proposed that the absorption of both University of Central Greece departments by the University of Thessaly be examined.
- 4.4** The plan proposes the merger of the University of Patras with the University of Western Greece into a new University of Patras-Western Greece. Although we believe that this proposal is in the right direction as regards the absorption of the University of Western Greece by another HEI, we believe that this would incur smaller costs if done by the TEI of Messolonghi, bearing in mind the subject areas of the departments being absorbed and their possible closure or transformation (see also §4.2). Furthermore, the possibility of having an annex of the aforementioned TEI in the town of Agrinio with a further reduction in the cost of the total intervention should be studied. The HQA notes the misplaced proposal in the Plan for the establishment of three Departments of two Schools in Agrinio, something which would contravene the spatial criteria (§4.1). Moreover, the HQA does not agree with the proposed renaming of the University of Patras for reasons of preserving its recognisability and the related problems such a change would incur.
- 4.5** The Plan proposes the creation of a federation of the five universities in Attica under the name ‘Adamantios Korais’, so that it can develop into a hub of excellence, achieve an economy of scale and respond to the country’s development priorities. No details, however, are given as to its administration. On the basis of references made by the ministry to similar formations abroad, the HQA believes that the overall administration of the federation will be a loose one in relation to the individual institutions and will have few possibilities for essential interventions. The result of this is that their interaction will remain at the same levels as today. The application of the criteria of size and structure on the individual universities of the federation demonstrates that these institutions will remain essentially as is, i.e. they will not cover the necessary university breadth and size and, as such, analogous interventions are required. As mentioned, the HQA has prepared a draft plan of interventions to the HEI map which includes proposals for the above institutions. The concept of a federation will create further bureaucratic irregularities and costs without the corresponding academic benefits.

4.6 The plan foresees the merger of the TEI of Thessaloniki and the TEI of Serres into a new TEI of Central Macedonia. We agree with this proposal with the following observations:

- i.** The new HEI will have four campuses. The institution must study the possibility of consolidating it into two (Thessaloniki and Serres) or the conversion of the ‘single’ departments into vocational training institutes under the umbrella of the HEI (see also §4.1). This study must take into account the academic profiles of these departments, the existing facilities, the cost of moving, etc.
- ii.** Each of the HEIs two (at most) campuses must host a credible number of Schools. This demand, which is not covered by the proposals in the Plan, must be satisfied for operational and academic reasons.
- iii.** In the Plan three Departments will still have an insufficient number of professors (under eight). This must be corrected in a manner to be proposed by the new Institution.

4.7 The Plan proposes the merger of the TEI of Lamia and the TEI of Halkida to create the new TEI of Central Greece. The HQA agrees with this proposal with the following observations:

- i.** The new HEI will have five campuses. The possibility of consolidating it into two (Lamia and Halkida) or the conversion of the ‘single’ departments into vocational training institutes under the umbrella of the HEI (see also §4.1) must be studied. This study must take into account the academic profiles of these departments, the existing facilities, the cost of moving, etc.
- ii.** Each of the HEIs two (at most) campuses must host a credible number of Schools. This demand, which is not covered by the proposals in the Plan, must be kept for operational and academic reasons.
- iii.** In the Plan two Departments still have an insufficient number of professors (under eight). This must be corrected in a manner to be proposed by the new Institution.
- iv.** In the Plan one School will still have only one Department. The HEI must make a proposal for the resolution of this issue, taking into account point (i) above.

4.8 The Plan proposes the merger of the TEIs of Patras, Messolonghi and the Ionian Islands into one new TEI of Western Greece and the Ionian Islands. The HQA considers that this proposal is in the right direction as regards the merger of the TEI of Messolonghi and the TEI of the Ionian Islands. The merger of these two will create a new TEI of sufficient size and autonomy so as to not require its further merger with the TEI of Patras, especially if the latter’s merger with the University of Western Greece is implemented, as suggested (§4.4). Further observations:

- i.** A large number of campuses (five), see §4.6 (i)
- ii.** Fragmentation of the academic structure, see §4.6 (ii)
- iii.** Insufficient number of professors in seven Departments

iv. Preservation of two Schools with just one Department (§4.7 (iv))

4.9 The plan foresees a new federal Attic TEI for the TEI of Piraeus, the TEI of Athens and the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE), with a similar organisation, we believe, to the federation of the five universities of Attica. Beyond the comments mentioned at §4.5, we believe that the problems of size, breadth and quality will not be challenged satisfactorily by the proposed reform. A healthier and more long-lasting alternative would be for the ASPETE to be integrated into the National Technical University (NTUA), which will offer some guarantee of its upgrading. Similarly, the TEI of Piraeus could be incorporated into the University of Piraeus.

5 Level of Academic Unit

5.1 The attempted reform of the structure of the country's HEIs is an exceptionally complex effort. Correspondingly, it is difficult to present any criticism for each aspect of the system. For example, there is the possibility of disagreement over the merger of institutions but agreement on individual proposed reforms at the level of academic units, etc. As such, there will follow a concise opinion on the absorption of the 94 departments, according to the Plan.

5.2 The Athena Plan does not contribute to clarifying the philosophy and role of technological higher education, one of the two poles of higher education. A characteristic example of this is the excessive number of departments of Business Administration and Economics & Management preserved in the TEIs, despite the fact that their technological character is not obvious nor is there a differentiation in terms of content and goals from the similarly numerous analogous departments in the universities.

5.3 Although it appears to be in the right direction, the absorption of the 94 Departments as foreseen in the Plan cannot be effectively commented on given the structural gaps that will still be preserved in the HEI system after the implementation of the Plan. Interventions should be done 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, so as to face the challenges of the future with the ability to achieve distinction and, ultimately, excellence. Regrettably, the whole Plan preserves a non-rational arrangement and an weakening of the academic potentials. Although desirable, the reduction in the number of Departments 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 credibility. We summarise the main points that must be satisfied before an Institution can be called a HEI:

- a. Sufficient size of the Institution

- b. Sufficient number of Schools and Departments
- c. Appropriate organisation of all the Departments into Schools
- d. Sufficient number of professors
- e. One Annex at most with a credible number of Schools

5.4 Some specific observations:

5.4.1 As regards the consolidation of Foreign Language Departments (Thessaloniki and Athens universities), although this may at first seem acceptable we believe that it should be preceded by an amendment so that the same Department can award different types of degrees (concept of programmes of study) for the obvious professional and other reasons graduates may have, bearing in mind the specifics of foreign language education. Since this is an internal matter for the two Institutions it would be useful to take their opinions into serious consideration.

5.4.2 It is proposed that the new TEI Computer Engineering Departments which house Departments of applied and information technology be renamed Department of Information Technology or Department of Informatics Engineering Technology, in correlation with the Departments of Technological Engineering and Surveying as well as in accordance with the new technological subject of these Departments, so as to avoid any confusion with the Departments of Informatics Engineering in Schools of Engineering.

5.4.3 It is foreseen that two of the only three Departments of Aquaculture and Fisheries, with a clear technological orientation, be closed. Fish farming in Greece represents 60% of European production with significant export activities and a large number of private investments, for example in Igoumenitsa. It is proposed that two, rather than one, of these TEI departments be kept.

5.4.4 There are cases of the absorption of HEI Departments whose programmes of studies and academic origins of their students are both completely different from those of the absorbing Departments, with clear problems for the completion of studies of students with such diverse origins. For these Departments there should be a transitional regulation as specified at §2.3. Typical examples:

- The Department of Public Relations and Communications of TEI of Western Macedonia (Kastoria Annex). Although Communications belongs to the Humanities, here it belongs to a Department with an economic orientation (Business Administration), where students cannot satisfactorily follow the courses of the said Department as a result of their insufficient subject background (the overwhelming majority followed the humanities concentration).
- The Department of Interior Architecture, Decoration and Design of the TEI of Serres, whose students must join either

the Department of Clothes Design and Manufacture in the TEI of Thessaloniki or the Department of Design and Wood and Furniture Technology of the TEI of Larissa.

5.4.5 [Here new additional observations by the PS team may be added.]

6 Conclusions and proposals

- 6.1** Higher education in Greece faces chronic problems. The HQA has previously expressed the need for structural reforms to the map of the country's HEIs so that they can respond to society's demands with an openness and creativity. The opening of the dialogue on the issue with the publication of the Athena Plan is therefore welcome.
- 6.2** The HQA agrees with the statements in the Plan on how the country's academic map developed over the past twenty-five years, the lack of scholarly criteria and needs, and the absence of developmental criteria.
- 6.3** The general goals of the Athena Plan for the merger of Institutions and Departments with similar subjects, the goal of creating hubs of excellence, implementing economies of scale, promoting technological education, promoting research and innovation and the development of competitive human resources within the European area are correct.
- 6.4** For the reasons given above, the proposal contained in the Plan can only be considered as a small step in the right direction, although with many weakness, the main one being the inconsistent and non-uniform application of criteria.
- 6.5** The preceding comments concern only that section of the network of HEIs for which interventions were proposed. As such there is an equally large section which, according to the Plan, will stay as is despite the fact that it does not fulfil the criteria. There are no specific comments for this section.
- 6.6** The acceptance in principle of the Plan's proposals by the HQA is accompanied by serious preconditions that must be met before the proposed intervention takes place or alongside it. This is a particularly important point as, otherwise, there is a serious danger that any benefits expected from the Plan's interventions will be cancelled out.
- 6.7** The HQA believes that the government must urgently produce a complete Plan on the basis of the criteria set, which can be implemented in phases if necessary. The HQA has, as already mentioned, prepared a complete draft

plan that could be used as the starting point for negotiations with stakeholders, under the aegis of the Ministry of Education.