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The EU Economy–Education Agenda and Reforms in Greek Tourism Education (2000–2010)

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Abstract
This article explores how the European Union's (EU) policy directions influenced the shaping of educational policy in Greece during the first decade of the 21st century, with a particular focus on tourism education. Initially, education policies are outlined as part of a broader EU economic strategy, highlighting key milestones such as the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Lisbon Treaty (2001). The paper then presents the general developments in Greek educational policy and examines how these were specifically implemented in tourism education. An attempt is made to analyze these developments through the lens of the EU's economic strategy as formulated in Lisbon, considering learning outcomes, the skills framework, the structure of education, and educational pathways in interrelation with the economic objectives set during that decade. Finally, a brief evaluation of the educational policy of the period is provided, emphasizing the need to expand research in the field under discussion.

Keywords: Economy–Education, Bologna Process, Learning Outcomes, Tourism Education, Educational Pathways, Greece

1. Introduction: The Education–Economy Relationship in the EU

As early as the Maastricht Treaty (1992), national policies began—initially at a declaratory level—to adopt common directions, placing education and training at the center of a unified EU strategy. In the conclusions of the European Council of Lisbon (March 2000), the objective of a more competitive, knowledge-based EU was articulated (European Council, 2000), with the role of education significantly upgraded. Pepin (2011) notes that in this document education is examined as a "tool" for economic development, identifying the fields of international economic competition in the areas of information and knowledge (pp. 26–27). The EU thus announced the design of an educational policy that would move along these two axes, under the overarching goal of enhancing its economic competitiveness.

The process of specifying these general directions in Greece coincided with the emergence of tourism as a key pillar of the national economy, with a significant contribution to GDP and employment (Kalantzi, Tsiotas, & Polyzos, 2023; WTTC, 2023). National development priorities therefore incorporated these directions with particular willingness, especially in the field of Tourism Education.

The aim of this article is to map the general EU directions in education in the decade following Bologna (1999–2010), to investigate how these were specified in national education policies in Greece, and to examine their subsequent integration into Tourism Education. Particular interest is also placed on analyzing outputs, with emphasis on educational pathways as direct results of education policy in tourism. The distinction identified in existing studies between a "front-line" pathway and a second "administrative" pathway raises research questions regarding both the EU's education strategy and the policies implemented by Greek governments during the first decade of the 21st century.

2. EU Policy Directions in Education (1999–2010)

2.1. Specifying Economic Objectives in Education Policies

The Lisbon Strategy (2000) established a framework of objectives concerning the economy and employment. The EU's goals for a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy were translated into specific directions in the field of education. Among the selected indicators were increasing participation in lifelong learning, reducing early school leaving, and enhancing the skills of the workforce (European Council, 2000).

At the same time, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was introduced as a "tool" for shaping a coherent educational policy. Although it did not include legally binding acts, it set a framework for jointly defining objectives and measuring the performance of Member States. The European Commission assessed the progress toward these common objectives through indicators and benchmarks, presenting the results in comparative reports (European Commission, 2003, 2009). It thus appears that the EU's economic priorities during this period—particularly with regard to growth and employment—served as the starting point for the creation of a monitoring framework, based on the consent of the Member States. This framework of soft governance also defined a set of directions for national education policies.

2.2. Higher Education as the Spearhead of the EU's Unified Education Policy

The aforementioned directions placed higher education at the center, as a crucial driver of the "knowledge economy," leading to a series of structural changes within the sector. EU universities were thus called upon to play a key role in achieving the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy. The idea of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was first introduced in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), and its implementation began with the Bologna Process (1999), one year later. Issues such as the comparability of higher education systems and the enhancement of their global competitiveness were addressed.

The following objectives were set for implementation, forming the foundations of the EHEA:

- adoption of a three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor–Master–PhD)
- adoption of a credit transfer system (ECTS)
- establishment of quality assurance mechanisms
- promotion of mobility within the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2010)

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008) complemented the Bologna reforms a few years later, providing a common classification of learning outcomes across eight levels. Transparency and the recognition of qualifications were prerequisites for strengthening cross-border mobility of both workers and students within the EU, particularly in sectors such as tourism, where seasonality and mobility are inherently high.

3. Education Policy in Greece During the Decade 2000–2010

This section examines the main features of education policy in Greece during the period 2000–2010. The analysis is organized along two axes: first, the general directions of education policy in Greece as shaped by the EU; and second, their specification in higher and vocational education. Emphasis is placed on highlighting the overall decision-making framework and the resulting structural reforms.

3.1. From EU Strategy to Greek Educational Reforms

The formulation of general directions by the EU for shaping education policy on the basis of economic priorities coincided with an effort to modernize the Greek education system. This context triggered intense reform activity that has shaped the profile of Greek education to this day. It is important to note that these reforms did not constitute a mere mechanical transfer of external directives; rather, they were adapted to the economic, social, and demographic particularities of the Greek education system (OECD, 2011).

These particularities include, among others, the highly centralized character of the Greek education system and its dependence on nationwide examinations as a mechanism for allocating students to higher education institutions—and, subsequently, to segments of the labor force. In addition, inequalities in access to formal education are observed in Greece, stemming from economic and geographical factors (OECD, 2011).

As mentioned above, structural reforms focused primarily on higher and vocational education. This choice was closely linked to the EU's objective of gaining competitive advantages in its economy, with emphasis on establishing a unified framework of qualifications and competencies and on creating an environment that promotes workforce mobility.

3.2. Reforms in Higher and Vocational Education

With regard to developments in higher education under the umbrella of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Greece proceeded with:

- the adoption of the three-cycle degree structure;
- the widespread implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement;
- The establishment of the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQAA/ADIP) in 2005, in line with EU standards (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2010).

Within the framework of lifelong learning, vocational education became a key area of reform, particularly through funding from the European Social Fund. Institutes of Vocational Training (IEKs) and various training programs were further developed. These policies were closely linked to EU priorities, especially the aforementioned objective of improving the skills provided to the workforce. According to the OECD report *Education Policy Advice for Greece* (2011), improving efficiency and quality in education was set as a prerequisite for increasing productivity and achieving better social outcomes (OECD, 2011).

4. Tourism Education in Greece During the Decade 2000–2010

For the Greek economy, where tourism has long constituted a key driver of development, tourism education became a privileged field for implementing EU policy directions. The objective of upgrading human capital in a particularly demanding and highly internationalized sector rendered the reform framework of that period especially critical (Tsartas, Zagotsi & Kyriakaki, 2020; Dionysopoulou, 2023).

4.1. Structural Reforms: The Structure of Tourism Education

The structural changes introduced in tourism education moved toward convergence with the EU strategy aimed at improving the quality and transparency of qualifications, as reflected in the European Qualifications Framework (European Commission, 2003; European Commission, 2008). These restructuring efforts were guided by the broader objective of building a competitive economy, as articulated in Lisbon. National quality assurance mechanisms (ADIP/HQAA) incorporated evaluation goals into tourism-related departments as well (Kikilia, 2022).

The gradual reconfiguration of the tourism education system affected all levels. Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) and Departments of Tourism Business Administration were upgraded to higher education

institutions, offering four-year study programs (EQF level 6). The Higher Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE) were formally established as higher-level institutions, with particular emphasis on practical training. Public Institutes of Vocational Training (IEKs, now SAEKs) developed study guides aimed at certifiable qualifications (Kikilia, 2022).

Given the numerous structural differentiations that have taken place over recent decades, this analysis presents the structure of tourism education as it stands today. This choice is based on the assessment that the current form of tourism education gradually consolidates the reforms of the 2000–2010 period and reflects the main education and employment pathways examined in this article.

At the top of the administrative structure is the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Under its jurisdiction fall secondary vocational education (EPAL), post-secondary vocational training (SAEK, formerly IEK), and higher education (university departments and tourism study programs). In parallel, the Ministry of Tourism supervises a set of educational structures, including the two Higher Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE), vocational training institutes, and schools for tour guides. Regarding apprenticeship and its connection to the labor market, the Ministry of Labour is also involved through the Public Employment Service (DYPA), which operates apprenticeship structures related to the tourism sector (Kikilia, 2022).

4.2. The Restructuring of Learning Outcomes in Tourism Education

Study programs gradually shifted away from content-based curricula and adopted a learning-outcomes approach, in line with the EQF (European Communities, 2008) and the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006). Required qualifications were defined in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Teamwork, communication, entrepreneurship, and digital skills, among others, shaped the new qualifications framework (European Parliament & Council, 2006; European Communities, 2008; Vathi et al., 2018).

In tourism education, this shift was also reflected in a transformation of its conceptual language. Tourism came to be understood as a complex social phenomenon involving relationships, places, and identities (Tsartas et al., 2020). Within this framework, tourism education incorporates so-called soft skills. Communication with customers, teamwork, intercultural competence, and conflict management were integrated into curricula. Newly introduced digital skills included reservation systems, e-marketing, and the use of digital tourism platforms (European Parliament & Council, 2006; Gousiou, 2024; Malagas, Vasilakakis & Sdrali, 2024).

These learning outcomes and associated skills—integrated both into general education policy design and specifically into tourism education—constitute prerequisites for achieving the EU's economic objectives and the development model it promotes (Lampropoulos et al., 2022). The reforms of 2000–2010 represented an effort to align with the Lisbon Strategy, emphasizing skills, learning outcomes, and quality in education. However, studies have pointed out inequalities and discontinuities in both design and implementation (Tsartas et al., 2020; Dionysopoulou, 2023; Kikilia, 2022; Lampropoulos et al., 2022).

Tourism education thus provides a particularly representative example of how EU strategies were specified into concrete educational reforms, offering fertile ground for critical analysis of the broader education–economy relationship.

4.3. Outputs of Tourism Education and Pathways to Employment

Reforms in tourism education under the Lisbon Strategy aimed to restructure education and training in alignment with EU objectives concerning economic competitiveness, employment, and workforce adaptability. The language of learning outcomes, key competences, and lifelong learning—reflected in the EQF and national certification frameworks—positioned education as a mechanism for aligning skills and qualifications with the EU's economic agenda (European Council, 2000; European Commission, 2003, 2009; European Parliament & Council, 2006; European Communities, 2008).

Although this analysis focuses on 2000–2010, more recent studies and data are utilized to demonstrate the long-term continuity of trends, particularly in relation to employment outcomes.

Tourism education, implementing these directions, restructured both its institutional framework and learning outcomes to channel different types of graduates into distinct labor market positions. Research indicates that this restructuring has largely been organized around two main educational pathways that remain observable today.

The first pathway begins in secondary vocational education (EPAL) and continues into post-secondary vocational training (SAEK/IEK). This vocational track typically leads to lower- and mid-level positions in the labor market. Programs at EQF level 5, strongly practice-oriented, combine mandatory internships/apprenticeships and aim at direct professional integration in occupations such as front-desk employee, hospitality unit staff member, culinary technician, and tour guide (Gousiou, 2024; DYPA).

The second pathway consists of tertiary tourism education. University departments and ASTE institutions are organized around studies in tourism management, tourism policy, and destination management, preparing graduates for managerial, planning, and strategic roles within the tourism sector (Gousiou, 2024). According to the literature, the vocational pathway primarily supplies "front-line" positions in hospitality and catering, while the university pathway corresponds to comparatively fewer positions of higher responsibility and status.

Thus, the new structure and learning outcomes of tourism education, shaped under the Lisbon framework, organized two distinct and unequal education–training pathways:

- an "administrative" pathway in higher education, leading to managerial roles for a smaller proportion of graduates;
- a "front-line" pathway through EPAL and IEK/SAEK, feeding the majority of workers into lower-skilled, seasonal, and often low-paid positions.

Tourism as an economic activity is inherently characterized by seasonality and heavy reliance on hospitality and catering services, which typically do not require highly specialized labor. To the extent that flexibility, lower specialization, and seasonality constitute structural features of the sector, the educational reforms aligned outputs with these objective labor market needs (Baum, 2015; Costa et al., 2017; Bithymitris & Papadopoulos, 2022).

Empirical data further illustrate this differentiation. Simantiraki and Dimou (2016), in a study of high-category hotels in Crete, found that only 24% of staff were graduates of tertiary tourism education, confirming that the "administrative" pathway concerns a minority of employees. The majority of positions were filled by graduates of lower education levels or by workers without formal tourism training.

Internships and in-company training also significantly influence outcomes. According to Malagas et al. (2024), 79% of employers reported selecting students from tourism schools for internship programs. The main reasons cited were identifying new staff (60%), reducing labor costs (53%), and ensuring trained personnel (43.8%). The EPAL–IEK/SAEK pathway is thus strongly reinforced through internships and in-company training, primarily channeling workers into front-line, seasonal, and lower-paid positions.

When these findings are combined with broader analyses portraying tourism work as predominantly low-paid, seasonal, and often precarious (Baum, 2015; Costa et al., 2017; Bithymitris & Papadopoulos, 2022), a picture emerges of challenging labor conditions within a sector that nonetheless contributes substantially to GDP. These conclusions, however, derive from geographically and economically limited samples. Broader empirical research covering a wider spectrum of employment in tourism would be methodologically valuable.

5. Conclusions and Contemporary Implications

With regard to the assessment of the decade 2000–2010 in terms of the design and implementation of education policies—both at the EU level and nationally—a large-scale reform agenda was undertaken that decisively shaped

the profile of the Greek education system. Based on decisions of EU bodies and relevant studies, it becomes evident that the reciprocal relationship between economy and education constituted the methodological foundation upon which education policies were designed. More specifically, the definition of economic objectives—competitiveness, growth, employment, and the knowledge economy—was followed by a long-standing debate concerning the role education was expected to play in achieving them. EU institutions regularly evaluated the implementation of these policies through indicators, benchmarks, and monitoring mechanisms, while simultaneously formulating new proposals and adjustments.

Tourism education in Greece was significantly influenced by these economic objectives, with reforms reaching all its levels. Changes concerned its structure and organization, the definition of desired learning outcomes that formed the basis for curricula and study programs, and its linkage with the economy. These aspects of the reform process require further exploration in future research. Moreover, for a critical analysis of these education policies to be considered adequate, it is methodologically necessary to investigate in depth their outputs—particularly educational pathways, both as indicators for drawing conclusions about education policy and as expressions of labor market realities.

It should be clarified, however, that this article addresses only certain general axes within a limited time frame (2000–2010). A substantial part of the economy–education nexus in the EU and its implications for tourism education remains largely unexplored. From the Bologna Process (1999) to the present, nearly three decades of economic and political developments have unfolded, rendering this field of research both complex and of significant theoretical and practical interest.

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