

## Student engagement in the University of the Peloponnese: A case study in the framework of the IMEP Project<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Student engagement is a multilevel concept that can refer to student representation and participation in higher education governance, which is one of the foundational values in European HE and a high priority topic in the European higher education policy agenda.

In Europe, where national legislation often defines the relationship of the state with higher education institutions, the necessity for the development of a legal framework that provides for student participation in university governance is advocated for by various analysts and organizations involved in policy-making, such as the European Student Information Bureau, which highlighted the importance of student involvement in university governance. In Greece, as in many European countries, legislation shows appreciation for the idea that higher education should play a role in preparing students for life as active, responsible citizens in democratic societies (Klemencic, 2011, p. 74).

In the framework of the Bologna Process, the Ministers of Education affirmed that students are full participants in the organization and content of education, marking the official recognition of student engagement in higher education governance (Prague Communiqué, 2001). In the Berlin Communiqué (2003), the Ministers noted that national legal measures for ensuring student participation were largely in place, and called on the institutions and student organizations to identify ways to increase *actual* student involvement in higher education governance. Ever since 2003, policies providing for student involvement have grown and their participation has been unanimously accepted as a principle among all stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area (Popovic 2011). Obviously, the establishment of a legal framework does not guarantee *actual* student engagement. This was also indicated by a small-scale research that was commissioned by the Council of Europe on the issue of student engagement

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(Persson 2003).

Student engagement can also refer to taking into consideration student views on curriculum development and university provisions through quality assurance (QA) processes. Regarding the EU modernization agenda for higher education, EU advisory committees address the issues of student-centred learning and QA, propagating the participation of all stakeholders. Student participation is considered essential in internal and external processes of QA (McAleese et al 2013).

The dominant discourse in each country depends strongly on the broader context and the social, political and economic dynamics. It could be argued therefore, that student views regarding engagement in university life are not static, but are dynamically shaped, given that they are social subjects embedded in a specific context.

In this paper, we present a shift from a previous/traditional more politicized form of student engagement – dominant in Greece from the 80's - towards a more utilitarian view, highlighting the importance of employability and student engagement through QA processes. We attempt to reconcile these views in a unitary framework, taking into consideration the function of university and to grasp the current dynamics in the Greek context.

Thus, we present the Greek institutional framework for university governance, as shaped over the last 30 years, by Acts 1268/82 and 4009/11, and data for student participation in student election during the period 1982-2012. This choice is justified as the process of election of student representatives in university decision-making bodies is the apex of student participation. We then present a case study on the University of the Peloponnese, exploring current student views on engagement and finally juxtaposing involvement in university governance through participation in students' politicized organisations to engagement through quality assurance.

## **Method**

In this paper two complementary studies are combined, with a view to present and explore shifts in student engagement under conditions of crisis.

Our on-going interest focuses on tracing and interpreting the increasing student apathy and disengagement from participation in university governance. In this framework, we compiled the time series regarding student participation in student elections during the period 1982-2012 presented in Figure 1 (see the Appendix). We constructed this figure by taking into account the absolute total number of students enrolled in Greek universities, obtained from the National Statistics Institute (ELSTAT), and the absolute number of students that voted in

student elections obtained from the archives of the daily newspaper “Ta Nea”<sup>2</sup>. The sources of the data presented by the newspaper were provided by the student-politicized organisations at each university. Based on these data, we calculated abstention rates. Here, we attempt to provide some interpretations by taking into account changes in the institutional framework.

Within the framework of the project *Internationalisation and Modernisation of Education and Processes in the Higher Education of Uzbekistan-IMEP*, we conducted a comparative study across all participating countries (i.e., Uzbekistan, U.K. and Greece). To explore student engagement in the different countries, a questionnaire was constructed targeting students’ current priorities, the skills they consider useful for their future career and QA issues. In particular, students were asked:

- a. Whether specific employability competences and skills are sufficiently taught. We referred to Instrumental, Interpersonal, Cognitive, Management and Leadership skills, and professional ethics. We also referred to knowledge acquisition in these areas through the curriculum.
- b. Whether they considered these employability competences and skills useful for their future careers.
- c. If they know how/if their potential/future employers are involved in curricula.
- d. Their degree of satisfaction with the university career centre, if any. Their own priorities and wishes regarding career services were also explored.
- e. Whether they consider the development of an employability policy through a set of actions on the part of the university important
- f. Whether they know and use other services in their professional area, apart from the ones university offers.
- g. Whether they feel ready to enter the job market
- h. f) The extent to which they are actively engaged in their studies and university life (i.e., making active decisions for their studies, their sense of belonging in community of staff and students, participation in specific activities etc).

The survey was conducted in October 2015, with senior undergraduate and postgraduate students of the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Peloponnese. The total number of senior undergraduate students at the Faculty of Social and Education Policy (i.e., students being in the third and the fourth year of studies) was 179 students, while in the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations the respective number of students was 159 students.

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<sup>2</sup> “Ta Nea” is a reputable newspaper that follows closely developments in education and publishes the results of student elections on a national basis annually.

Thus, a sample of 10% from both faculties filled out the questionnaire of the survey (i.e., 18 students from the Faculty of Social and Educational Policy and 16 students from the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations). One student from the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations did not respond to the majority of the questions. Thus, the total number of undergraduate students that actually completed the questionnaire was 33. Students were randomly selected from the lists of senior students. As for the purposes of this paper, the number of students allows us to explore the issues at stake and provide some initial findings and interpretations, taking into account that no other criteria were employed regarding student sampling and that the number of the sampled students could have been higher. Moreover, 18 MA students from both faculties and 6 PhD students agreed on completing the questionnaire. Thus, the total number of respondents in the survey was 57. Respectively, the sample of the MA and PhD students is not representative.

In order to further understand student priorities, the importance assigned to involvement in student-politicized organisations and the meaning assigned to the particular skills for employability in the current conditions of crisis, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with students of the Faculty of Social and Educational Policy between February and March 2016. We adopted a purposive sampling method, as we chose five students who actively participate in student organisations and five students who are not politically involved but who do participate actively in university life.

### **Student participation in university governance through students' organisations**

In Greece, student organisations are politicized (i.e., directly connected to and influenced by political parties and function as a major channel for the political socialisation of the student body). In Figure 1, we present abstention rates in student elections over the period of 1982-2012, which is marked by two education Acts that introduced different modes of governance of higher education.

The Act 1268/1982 was introduced in a year when approximately 40% of the student body abstained from student elections. During that period, there was high social demand for redistribution of power in higher education (Kladis, 2014), advocated by the newly elected socialist government and the powerful student movement that a few years before had a decisive role in overturning dictatorship. Indeed, the Act 1268/82 altered the established power relations in higher education that were based on the undisputable authority of full professors and introduced a mode of governance that conflates with Olsen's (2007, pp. 32-35) ideal type of the University as internal democracy. Only five years later, the abstention rates dropped to 19%, presenting the highest student participation ever achieved until today.

This Act introduced major changes in university organization and governance (Kladis, 2014). Focusing on aspects that are of interest for this paper, the Act allocated considerable power to the students, providing for the participation of their representatives in university governance. The election of the university decision-making bodies (i.e., Rector's council, Deanship and Chair of the Department) was based on the total number of the faculty, whose vote had a significant weight (50%), on the vote of the other groups participating in the university's governance (i.e., undergraduate students (40%), postgraduate students (2,5%), administrative personnel (2,5%), technical personnel (2,5%) and lab assistants (2,5%)). Thus, for the first time, students could promote their demands for equity and social justice against the arbitrariness of the professoriate. Therefore, participation in student elections became of paramount importance, since student representatives were appointed by student organisations in accordance with the votes they gained. Such a mode of governance appears to leave more room for active student engagement in university life.

However, there was a failure to sustain high participation rates. As Bergan notes (2004, p. 9), there is a problem with actual student commitment to participating and raising sufficient interest in the student body to bring most students to cast a vote. Since 1989, one may note a steady decline in participation rates. During the years 1997-1998, student abstention rates rose again to approximately 70%, while in the years 2000-2001 abstention rates reached their highest level, almost 78%. It is obviously a case where questions are raised regarding the legitimacy of student representatives in university governance (Bergan, 2004, p. 9).

We note that 1989 was a year of substantial political turmoil when the prime minister of the country was accused of corruption and bribery, led to trial and was finally acquitted of all charges. This period is characterized by a generalised public mistrust and allegations of corruption that led to student disengagement with and aversion to politics, as the majority of the student body realized that student leaders used their popularity and power as a springboard to pursue either an academic or a political career. However, mistrust regarding student politics is not a uniquely Greek characteristic, as the relations of student representatives with political parties has always been a contested issue. Ensuring the independence of student representation is paramount, not only as a value in itself, but also because perceived political bias leads to further mistrust among students and thus to further political apathy (Klemencic, 2011, p. 80).

The initial democratic intention to empower the subordinate student body by introducing the Act 1268/1982 was overridden, as what actually happened was the empowerment of student organizations and appointed student representatives. Thus, student organisations were in a position to bargain with academic candidates for university decision-making bodies, by ensuring a block of

favourable electors (Lamprianides, 2004). The public mission of the university was undermined, as candidates competed with each other for the support of student organisations. This would not be troublesome, if support was granted on the basis of candidates' merit or the proposed university policy. However, usually these bargains formed part of petty party politics that had nothing to do with university policy and favoured the personal agendas both of student representatives and candidates for university governance. The situation was further aggravated during periods when a weak student movement or an inactive and apathetic student body could not hold student organisations accountable for their actions (Lamprianides, 2004). In contradistinction to student vote, which became of paramount importance, the importance of faculty vote in the election process diminished, as faculty constitutes a heterogeneous, not easily manipulated group, which rarely offers a block of electors to the candidates. Ultimately, the provisions of the Act led to a situation where academic and political networks were closely interwoven, allowing for a refraction of the social and political field in the higher education field. Soon enough, the dominant clientelist structure of the Greek society and economy (Mouzelis, 1987; 1999) spread to university life. Indicatively, a survey conducted in 1996 among 700 students of the National Technical University of Athens, concluded that 75% of the students disagreed with the dependence of student organisations with political parties and the manipulation of their vote. Moreover, 63% of the students expressed the opinion that the mode of student representation should change (Ta Nea, 1996).

The educational reform in 1997, which was never put into effect met with the strong resistance of the academic and educational communities. Despite a long series of rallies and protests that lasted almost three months, student mass participation in politics was not triggered anew. Most students remained disengaged from university life. It is worth noting that the period 1999-2000 was marked by a major crisis in the Greek stock market that led to a huge loss of wealth and to a breach of trust between the government and its constituency. We do not argue that student abstention rates are directly connected to the wider socio-economic and political processes. However, the lack of social trust affects all aspects of the public sphere in the long run.

The introduction of the Act 3374/2005 concerning Quality Assurance in higher education provokes again student protests against what was perceived of as commercialization of education. However, in 2005 student abstention rates rose again regarding the period 2002-2004. The Act 3549/2007 advocated direct universal student participation in student elections for the first time, aiming at the disentanglement of student organizations and candidates for the decision-making bodies (Sotiropoulos 2010). Despite the efforts to combat bargaining between student organizations and the candidates, student participation rates did not increase. Once again, it seems that Greek youth may protest against specific policies, but not making that much to change the rules of the game and

establish a new landscape.

The Act 4009/2011 introduced major changes in university governance, drawing on new public management principles. The Act introduced a new mode of governance, assigning a minor role to students by diminishing their power in the election process of university decision-making bodies. Moreover, universities are granted more autonomy from the state. Democratic organization and individual academic autonomy are viewed as hindrances to timely decisions and performance to be replaced by strong management. University Councils, comprising both internal (academics) and external (lay) members, are introduced aiming at bridging the gap between universities, society and the economy. The authority for the development of institutional and financial policy is transferred from the Senate to the Council. Accountability towards the state and society is pursued through the establishment of QA mechanisms, while budget allocation is for the first time linked to performance. With a view to improve university finances, incentives are provided for excellence in research, creation of spin-off companies and patents. It attempted to introduce a New Public Management organizational culture, seeing students as customers and soliciting student participation in QA processes through course/programme evaluation. The underlying model of student representation tends to be characterized by a depoliticised student government, which concentrates on providing student services that complement the institutional quality agenda (Klemencic, 2011, p. 78). Student exclusion from the election process of decision-making bodies did bring about significant student protests; thus leading to the conclusion that political apathy and indifference is the current dominant stance of the student body. Although we do not possess the exact newest data on student participation in student elections, the overall picture remains similar to the one of the previous years with high abstention rates.

### **The Case Study at the University of the Peloponnese**

In this part, we analyze the outcomes of the survey with the students of the school of social sciences of the University of the Peloponnese. At the same time, we draw from the ten interviews conducted with students of the Faculty of Social and Educational Policy in order to further explore and understand student attitudes. A first important outcome of data analysis is that students' attitudes are not differentiated according to their level of studies as well as to their sex. Thus, although students are of different age, education background and working experience, it seems that their needs and priorities in the current socio-economic context converge to a large extent. Obviously, the small sample in this case study does not allow us to make any generalization. Thus, we will present student data in total, without using the variables of sex and level of studies.

Data analysis indicates a strong student interest in the development of specific employability competences. It seems that students seek new employability skills

in order to face the increasing regional and global competition they face (Gibbs et al., 2013, p. 14). In a range of 80%-99%, undergraduate and postgraduate students strongly agree or agree that the development of most employability competences will be useful for their future career. Thus, all *instrumental skills* (i.e., communication skills, digital literacy, foreign languages, intercultural skills), and most *cognitive skills* (i.e., creativity, critical thinking, decision making) garner very high percentages of agreement- more than 90%. A little bit lower, but still higher than 80%, are the percentages of agreement with some cognitive skills, (i.e., analysis and problem solving, and initiation). The areas of *interpersonal skills* (i.e., leadership, team work, interpersonal understanding, relationship building) and *professional ethics* (i.e., responsibility at work, meeting deadlines, establishing good rapport with co-workers) are also considered of high importance, as in most cases the percentages of agreement range from 80% to about 97%. There are a few cases with lower percentages of student agreement regarding the usefulness of specific skills in these two areas, (i.e., negotiations skills (70%) and achievement orientation skills (73%)), but the major differentiation regards customer service orientation, as less than half of the sampled students (about 47%) considered it useful. Drawing on the interviews, students also agreed on the importance of these skills, but most of them were somehow puzzled regarding the meaning of “customer service orientation”. Follow-up questions revealed that students’ reluctance or disagreement was mainly due to ideological reasons rooted in the Greek educational and social context. Students themselves do not feel as customers of the universities they study in, while in the Greek labour market social scientists perceive their “customers” as beneficiaries of their services. We also have to take into account that many social scientists in Greece work in the public sector.

Regarding the last two employability competence areas, the picture is mixed. Despite the public policy rhetoric for the need to equip students with personal entrepreneurial capacities to deal with greater levels of uncertainty and complexity in both their work and personal life (Gibbs et al., 2013, p. 15), *management and leadership skills*, (i.e., strategic planning (60% of agreement), financial management (65%) and entrepreneurship (about 62%)) gain the lowest percentages of student agreement. On the other hand, the skill of self-control garners a very high percentage of agreement (about 93%), followed by project management skills and personal planning and organizational skills (about 82%). In the last broad area of *Knowledge*, procedural and declarative knowledge gain the lowest percentages of student agreement (about 60%), while on the other hand most students (more than 80%) consider general knowledge, subject related knowledge and knowledge of the relevant legal framework as useful. Drawing again on the interviews, most students did not immediately understand the meaning of declarative and procedural knowledge, but after they were provided with clarifications, they were agreed on their importance.



Thus, students recognize the usefulness of many employability competence areas, but they state that some of them are not sufficiently taught. Specifically, in the area of instrumental skills, only 40% agree that there are sufficiently taught intercultural skills. Similarly, in the area of interpersonal skills, less than half of the students are satisfied with the teaching of leadership skills and negotiation skills, while in the area of cognitive skills slightly higher than half of the students are satisfied with the teaching of decision-making skills and initiation skills. The areas in which most students are less satisfied appeared to be the teaching of *management and leadership skills*, *professional ethics* and the transmission of *knowledge*. Thus, only about 38% of the students agree that are sufficiently taught strategic planning skills, about 35% entrepreneurial skills, about 48% financial and project management, about 43% customer service orientation skills, about 48% achievement orientation skills, 40% procedural and declarative knowledge (40% and 30% respectively) and general knowledge (42%). As we saw, some of these skills were not considered useful for their future career by a part of the students.

In the context of a comparative research project, some questions may not apply to the national context of some participant countries. This is the case of the question regarding the ways employers are involved in the curriculum. In Greece, employers usually have minimum involvement in curriculum development. They may be asked informally about the skills they value in a graduate, but given their reluctance to hire (due to the economic situation), they rarely respond to university requests. Especially in Social Sciences and Humanities Schools, employers' involvement in curriculum development is not usual. Thus, in our survey, students expectedly did not respond to this question.

As far as the questions regarding the existence and the operation of a career centre supporting students in gathering employability skills and providing assistance in employment, most sampled students, expectedly, did not provide any answer. Although employability and entrepreneurial skills agenda constitutes a major challenge for university career departments and many of them collaborate with external agencies on the development of programs for enhancing a range of graduate entrepreneurial skills and capacity for self-employment (Gibbs et al. 2013, p. 27), the career centre of the University of the Peloponnese stopped operating in 2012 due to cost-cutting policy. However, most students did not also answer another question of the same category, (i.e., the kind of services a career centre or other relative university unit should provide to students). Taking into account the limitations resulting from this case study, it seems that the sampled students do not highly appreciate the role that a well-established career centre could play in their integration in the labour market. However, at the same time, only 18% of the students stated that they have full information about all potential employers. Moreover, students acknowledge that most of the graduates of their faculties are not employed according to their major within the first year. They nonetheless argue that they do have the necessary knowledge and skills to enter the profession. It is characteristic that at least 60%

of the sampled students do not know the existence of other services provided outside the university (i.e., business incubator, start-up consulting, entrepreneurial training or financing services), while only 35% of the students have used one or more of such services.

On the other hand, at least 80% of the students would highly appreciate universities action in the curriculum development in order to improve graduates employability, i.e., to run courses more relevant to the needs of the companies, to include practical classes in courses or to include compulsory work placement. Moreover, 81% of the students wish universities provide support to graduates after they have obtained their degree. However, that seems to be a rather vague statement, as we previously saw that most students did not even answer the question about the services that a university unit related to career development should provide to students. Finally, rather unexpectedly when taking into account the current economic conditions in Greece, only 33% of the students believe that the lack of vacancies is amongst the reasons for not recruiting recent university graduates during last years. Instead, most students (63%) pointed to the lack of previous work experience, while almost half of the students stated the lack of appropriate skills.

These survey results were further explored through interviews with students. The picture seems contradictory, as students seem to acknowledge the difficulties in finding a job and their ignorance of the labour market possibilities. They would like to have more practical classes or compulsory work placement, but simultaneously, most of them do not seem to seek assistance from their university. Moreover, most students feel confident regarding their skill and knowledge in entering the profession and they argue that the lack of previous experience is the major hindrance for getting a job. Interestingly, the lowest percentages of student agreement regard the skills that could possibly assist them in finding a job or starting their own venture, (i.e., entrepreneurial or strategic planning skills). This picture is probably due to the fact that young people, especially in the area of social sciences and humanities do not take into account the major changes in the Greek labour market the last decade as a result of the severe economic crisis. Thus, the employment rate of university graduates of the broader field of social sciences, economics and law has dropped by 17% from 2009-2017 (Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research 2017, p. 291). Moreover, during the same period, the employment rate of university graduates in the public sector, which is the major employer for social scientists in Greece, has dropped by 27% (Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research 2017, p. 300).

Thus, although the labour market has changed compared to the immediate past, some young people seem to ignore it. The public sector has now limited ability to absorb university graduates. Skills that were not that much appreciated in the public sector, such as strategic planning, financial management or entrepreneurial skills and were not fully promoted and taught in the Greek higher

education system, should be at the centre of interest in the years to come. However, these issues seem to be underestimated by a part of the students and by the universities themselves. The ignorance of young people about their possible employers may be interpreted by the fact that recruitment in the public sector was largely dependent on the social and political network that their families could mobilize. Interviews depicted this fuzzy picture. Students are seeking new competences and skills, but they are not sure why they are important and how they are going to use them. They recognize the difficulties in the labour market and would like a more active role of the university's career centre, yet they tend to believe that their integration in the labour market is not actually dependent on these aspects.

As we have already stated, the current Greek legal framework provides for student participation in university governance through their representatives in the decision-making bodies without voting power. In the University of the Peloponnese, students refuse to designate representatives in the decision-making bodies, as a reaction to the current institutional framework. All the interviewed students argue for the need to restore the previous legal framework (Law 1268/1982). Students actively participating in student organisations argued that the power of the student body has been diminished. Students who were not part of student organizations also argued that the current legal framework is inadequate but stressed that they are unable to express their views. All interviewed students agreed that there is limited interest for participation in the student union. Although they are informed by the Secretariat or through groups in social media about forthcoming meetings and problems concerning their university, on several occasions student meetings are adjourned due to lack of participation. Actually, students are rarely mobilized through their unions to undertake action to remedy inadequacies. However, the small size of their faculty allows them to express their views through direct contact with the teaching staff. All students agreed that most of the academics take into consideration students' views and cooperate with them. However, students actively involved in student organizations emphasized the importance to present the issues at stake at the General Assembly of the Faculty and sometimes express their views through organized protests. Moreover, these students stressed that major issues such as professional rights or student care (i.e., transportation, catering and housing) should be addressed at the Ministry level. Finally, most students argued that they wish to have a more active role in curriculum development and modules delivery, as well as in the elaboration of their job prospects.

However, with regard to QA issues, students participate more actively. They participate in the committees that prepare Faculty Internal Evaluation Reports, while a representative of MA Students participates in the QA Unit of the University, which is responsible for preparing the University Internal Evaluation report. Still, the overall participation rate in evaluation/quality assurance processes is low, which is rather expectable as the process for student evaluation

of modules has been instated the last five years. Moreover, up to 2014, printed questionnaires were distributed on a designated day to students for evaluating the modules of each semester. In order to facilitate student participation in evaluation processes, as well as data analysis, a platform that remains accessible for two weeks each semester had been developed. The platform operated for the first time in the academic year 2015-16 for undergraduate students, while during the current academic year (2017-2018), it is expected to offer the same possibilities to postgraduate students.

Survey data analysis indicates that students are generally satisfied with their study experience and that they feel adequately involved in university life. Specifically, about 70%-76% of the students feel that they participate in the decisions about what they study and how they study it and that they take responsibility for their learning. Moreover, in similar percentages, students feel that they form part of a community (about 69%), they actively contribute to shaping a community of staff and students (60%) and they have developed a sense of belonging (about 73%). We also note that 50%-55% of the students helped other university students, participated in a community-based project (paid or voluntary) and organized or made presentations at conferences. Finally, through QA mechanisms, feedback is provided through questionnaires (about 55%) but also informally, through discussions with student representatives and staff (about 21%). Students state that they emphasize the evaluation of the teaching and administration aspects of the course, while 50% of the respondents claim that they have noticed changes on the basis of the feedback they provided.

## **Conclusion**

Data analysis indicates that students are in a transition phase, trying to redefine their position and their prospects in a moving landscape. They argue for the need to restore the older legal framework (Act 1268/82). However, that legal framework did not inspire student engagement for a long time, while the introduction of the Law 4009/2011 did not generate a strong resistance from the student body. Thus, student engagement is not dependent solely on the mode of governance per se – or the existence of an “appropriate” legal framework.

The surveys and interviews conducted at the University of the Peloponnese clearly indicate that students are not interested in participating in University governance through students’ politicized organisations, whose discourse they consider tokenistic and directly related to the discourse of political parties. They value other forms of participation, (i.e., through quality assurance processes and/or curriculum development, which directly affect their future careers). Students seem to address the need to be better equipped with all the new skills and competences that could strengthen their position in a competitive labour market, both national and international. However, at the same time, students themselves seem to be trapped within the older social and economic structures.

The need to further explore the challenges for students ahead clearly emerges, while of great interest is also to explore whether Greek universities have also developed a cohesive strategy in order to meet with the new challenges.

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## APPENDIX

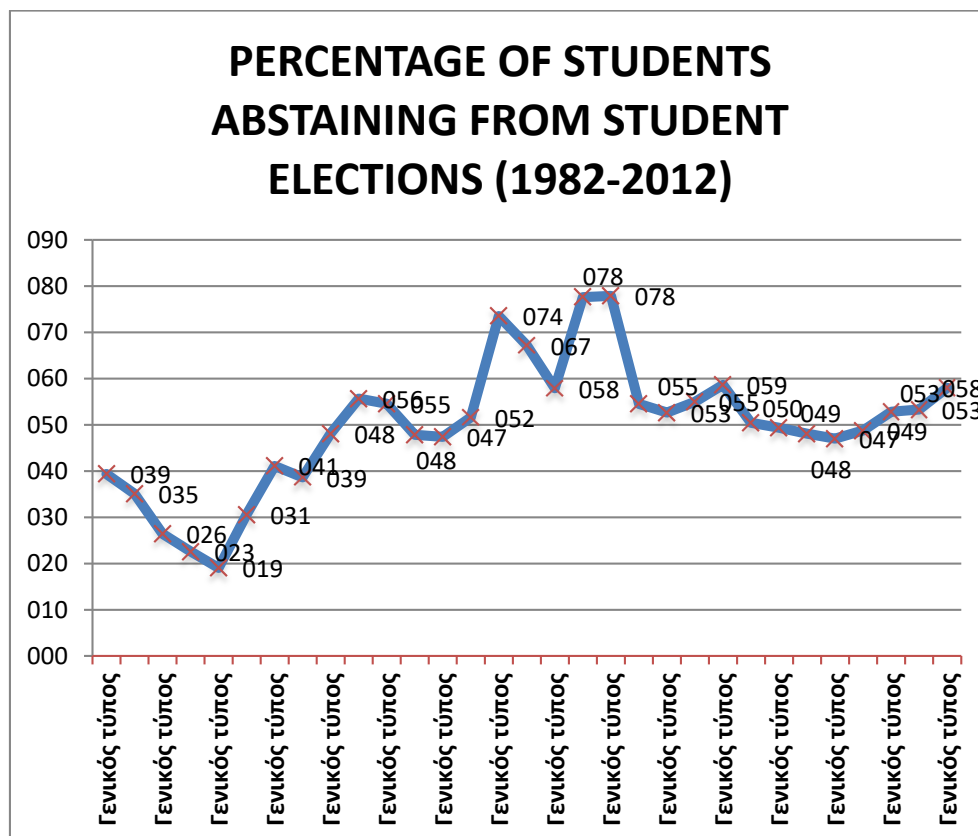


Figure 1