

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

**Intergenerational Mobility in Education:
policy proposals for increasing fairness in educational
outcomes & prospects across the Greece's student population**

Policy Brief

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Intergenerational Mobility in Education: policy proposals for increasing fairness in educational outcomes & prospects across the Greece's student population

Policy brief

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The aim of this policy brief is to provide a description of the challenges in intergenerational mobility in education in Greece and to provide concrete and targeted policy recommendations based on the results of the corresponding research paper. Policy proposals made in this brief focus on the need to ensure adequate educational, emotional and social services and resources to all students in Greece in order to help them reach their full potential.

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1. Background

1.1. Introduction

Education is a very important policy area for the economic development of a country over the long term. In addition, its contribution in promoting a country's social cohesion is well established in the literature. Developing skills across the social strata, it can enable upward social mobility and thus it can be a key tool for combatting poverty and various types of inequalities.

In Greece, the education system contributes to the goal of achieving a higher degree of social cohesion in many important ways: by providing to all citizens access to public education free-of-charge (up and including the first level of tertiary education), by providing education to refugee or immigrant children and children with other minority background (e.g., Roma children) and by co-educating children with and without special educational needs. However, many households in Greece resort to paid parallel schooling to prepare for university entry exams, which reduces the contribution of the domestic education system to the reduction of inequality, especially at the upper secondary level.

There is some evidence of upward social mobility in education in Greece, but this effect is not robust across intergenerational education mobility indicators. By international standards, a relatively high proportion of individuals in Greece achieve a higher educational attainment level compared to their parents' generation and the country has the highest enrolment rates in bachelor's programmes among individuals aged 19-24 years in the OECD (OECD, 2019). However, the country underperforms compared to peers when more refined metrics are considered, such as indicators assessing the intergenerational mobility across the educational distribution (from lower to upper quantiles and vice versa), placing it towards the bottom end of the relevant international rankings.

Amongst other tasks, our research paper summarizes the main literature regarding the challenges faced by students participating in the Greek education system in terms of truly enabling them to improve their relative position in Greece's socioeconomic hierarchy. Studies have identified various barriers and bottlenecks, despite the equitable values based on which the education system was established and the noticeable expansion of participation rates in secondary and tertiary education in recent decades.

Some of these factors include the high degree of endogenous reproduction of university faculties with strong career prospects (e.g. law studies, engineering and medical schools). This renders various programs of undergraduate and postgraduate studies a mere prerequisite for job market entry, with the socioeconomic background continuing to have a disproportionate influence on the subsequent career path of the graduates. Other factors are the low employment prospects of many tertiary and post-secondary non-tertiary education programmes and the broader trends effectively shifting competition to the post-graduate level of higher education. Indicatively, the country records one of the worst performances in the OECD with respect to employment prospects for university graduates (73% versus 85% for the OECD average for graduates aged 25-34 in 2019).

In the following sections we provide further background on the subject by very briefly discussing some of the main vulnerabilities of the Greek education system. We also discuss the main findings of our research paper to showcase its policy implications. We then proceed to presenting concrete, evidence-based policy proposals that can assist policy-makers in introducing measures that will enhance the education system's

degree of intergenerational mobility and that will support the educational and career prospects of all students in Greece, irrespective of their socioeconomic background.

1.2. The Greek education system: main vulnerabilities

In addition to the challenges discussed in the introduction, Greece's education system exhibits some key deficiencies both in terms of system inputs and outputs that are often detected and discussed in relevant statistics and reports.

Starting from system inputs, Greece has been chronically recording low levels of public expenditure on education by EU standards (4,5%, against an EU average of 5,0%, of GDP in 2020). Low levels of financing are often associated with reported shortages in human resources (with seasonal staff often filling permanent needs), an ageing population of teachers, outdated educational material and curricula, as well as infrastructure shortages, even though it is not always easy to find internationally comparable data for some of these metrics. Furthermore, Greece records the highest percentage of 15-year olds in the OECD with no access to career guidance through their school (OECD, 2020).

An indication of system input deficiencies is the high level of household payments for private education services such as afternoon tutorials preparing students for the final national exams ensuring admission to tertiary education. Private tutorials are also becoming increasingly prevalent amongst younger students (in primary and lower secondary education) as there is a widespread perception that the average quality of lessons offered in public schools does not suffice or that students need additional help in coping with school obligations.

Deficiencies in terms of system outputs are mainly reflected in the chronic underperformance of Greek students in the OECD's PISA program, where student's cognitive and educational performance is measured in the three (3) basic domains of Reading, Mathematics and Science. Greek students have been consistently underperforming in PISA test scores compared to the OECD average since 2000 and various efforts are being made to improve Greece's ranking, with limited results to date.

1.3. Socioeconomic barriers identified in the research paper

In our research paper we analysed data from the OECD's PISA program to assess the role of socioeconomic status on the cognitive performance and future plans of Greek high-school students. We also examined intertemporal trends in light of the economic crisis of the previous decade, as well as differences with other countries. Our basic premise was that students' performance in PISA tests and plans about the future reflect their chances in succeeding to exams for admission to tertiary education, their preferences and capabilities in terms of pursuing studies in more or less promising faculties and, ultimately, their career, income and life prospects in general.

The relationship between basic socioeconomic characteristics and adolescent educational performance (as measured in the context of the PISA program) was found to be rather stable but significant in the entire period examined (2000-2018). This implies that there is a need to produce a coherent strategy against educational disparities according to the socioeconomic status.

Out of the characteristics we examined, we found large and significant relationships between student outcomes and certain elements of socioeconomic and parental background that seem to matter for children most: educational resources at home, cultural possessions at home and parental emotional support. Parental socioeconomic position appears to be channelled to children through such cultural and emotional channels in addition to private school attendance throughout our analysis. We also highlighted other significant relationships between student outcomes and parental education and occupation that differ by domain and between parents.

We also found that non-educational, non-cultural home possessions or wealth appears to be negatively associated with educational outcomes and unrelated with students' aspirations. This finding suggests that material possessions, as such, that do not have an educational or cultural role do not appear to constitute a channel for the transmission of social advantage as far as children's educational outcomes or aspirations are concerned, while the effect of wealth depends on how it relates to other parental and household characteristics (e.g. occupation) and choices (e.g. to invest in private-school education).

Furthermore, our findings suggest that immigrant status is negatively associated with school performance in a consistent way across years. This relationship is larger for first-generation immigrants but also significant for second-generation immigrants. Besides, bullying was found to be a significant factor associated with lower student outcomes. Student differences in performance and aspirations according to gender were also revealed, pointing, inter alia, to the fact that educational and professional sectoral segregation between men and women starts from a very young age.

Last but not least, we found limited evidence that differences in school-level characteristics matter in Greece with the most notable exception of the private versus public school split (which also reflects socioeconomic disparities). We found weak (statistically insignificant) evidence of geographical disparities across the urban-rural divide, after controlling for other factors.

2. Policy proposals

The findings summarised in the previous section can help policy makers detect specific areas of intervention when designing policies for a more equitable distribution of educational outcomes across the student population in Greece. Based on the evidence, policies which could have a material impact include the following:

Key finding #1: Higher levels of educational and cultural resources available at home are associated with higher student performance and aspirations

Policy proposals:

- Provision of tax incentives to households prioritising the purchase of educational and cultural goods,
- Review and expansion of fragmented programmes subsidising the purchase of books and other educational and cultural goods for vulnerable households.

Key finding #2: Higher levels of emotional support provided by the student's parents are associated with higher student performance and aspirations

Policy proposals:

- Family policies enhancing work-life balance for parents so as to enable them to provide better emotional support towards their children.
 - Full harmonization of the parental leaves' framework between the public and private sector, including gradually for the self-employed,
 - Enhancement of flexible working arrangements (remote work, part-time work, flexible working hours) in the private sector. Even though recent legislative initiatives foresee these possibilities, it is proposed to further promote these practices through training initiatives. The latter should aim at cultivating a family-friendly employment culture and at training managerial and human resources' staff in order to better support parents in conciliating their professional and family life.

Key finding #3: Bullying is associated with lower student performance and aspirations

Policy proposals:

- Establish psychosocial support services available at the school level for every student, teacher and parent, inter alia through full-time availability of psychologists in every school,
- Develop and implement anti-bullying protocols at the school community level, following international good practice,
- Train teachers on identifying, monitoring and coordinating actions against bullying incidents,
- Assign to selected students in each school the role of mediators after training them on peer-counselling methods.

Key finding #4: Attendance of public schools is associated with lower student performance and aspirations

Policy proposals:

- Increase the level of public education expenditure with the aim of upgrading educational services and outcomes,
- Map the needs in human resources and infrastructure at the national level,
- Introduce incentives-based evaluation mechanisms for teaching staff,
- Evaluate and upgrade school educational material and curricula,
- Provide additional education resources in underperforming schools,
- Provide better opportunities for acquiring and updating skills relevant to the labour market of underperforming students by strengthening the initial and continuous vocational education and training system.

Key finding #5: Immigrant background and gender are associated with student performance and aspirations

- Provide adequate and effective career guidance programs in all schools. Emphasis should be given to preparing student for modern challenges in the labour market as well as to supporting

children from migrant and other vulnerable backgrounds. In addition, career guidance should aim at combatting gender-related sectoral segregation in education (and later, in studies and careers).

References

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