

## Greek undergraduate students: ‘Stagnant’, ‘perpetual’ or simply dropouts?

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### Abstract

*Since the 1980s, the expansion of the public higher education system in Greece and the increase of student numbers have contributed to the democratisation of higher education. However, the massification of the higher education system in Greece has been accompanied by the issue of the long delay of studies and the phenomenon of students not graduating, i.e., ‘stagnant’ or ‘perpetual’ students. Nowadays, the thorough study of this phenomenon is considered to be important not only for ‘equity’ reasons but also because of the implications it has for the accreditation of higher education institutions, as there are certain indicators calculated each year according to the timely completion of studies. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the students who have significantly exceeded the time limit for completing their studies in the Department of Social Policy at Panteion University. For the first time, we distinguish between active and inactive/dropout students based on whether or not they were making the compulsory course declaration. We analyse the relevant data for the last two decades, setting a framework for such research in Greece, while also taking into consideration the major higher education reforms that took place in the context of the Greek social formation.*

### Keywords

*Active/inactive students, ‘stagnant’ education, dropouts, higher education, Greece.*

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## **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, the expansion of higher education in Greece and the increase of student numbers have contributed to the democratisation of higher education. However, the massification of the higher education system in Greece has been accompanied by the issue of the long delay of studies and the phenomenon of students not graduating, i.e., ‘stagnant’ or ‘perpetual’ students. Nowadays, a thorough study of this phenomenon is considered to be important given the implications it has for the accreditation of higher education institutions, as there are certain indicators calculated each year according to the timely completion of studies.

Thus, this paper aims to investigate the graduates and the students who have significantly exceeded the time limit for completing their studies in the Department of Social Policy at Panteion University based on relevant data for the last two decades. Furthermore, an attempt will be made that the data would be interpreted on the basis of relevant research and in the context of major higher education reforms in Greece.

### **1. The ‘stagnant education’, the ‘perpetual’ students and dropping out of studies**

In the international literature, the problem of dropping out of studies is characterised by a high degree of complexity, which is also reflected in the definitions of the concept, with the central ones documenting transfer to another university or school, or permanent dropout. This complexity is further enhanced by the fact that dropout is neither a short-term and impulsive decision nor the result of the influence of a single factor. On the contrary, it is a process of cumulative influence of various factors that leads to dropping out of studies (Androulakis et al., 2022). There are various studies recognising that the causes of delaying or dropping out of studies are numerous and interrelated. At a broader level, these causes are related with institutional, social and economic factors, but also with managerial issues of higher education. In general, students delaying their studies have difficulties integrating into the academic and the social life. The various forms of (mainly cultural) capital, the *habitus* of the social class, as well as social relations such as gender, have an important effect on the timely and successful completion of studies. Thus, even in a context of higher education expansion, the problem of delaying or dropping out of studies continues, undermining the goal of equality, as students of lower social origin or belonging to disadvantaged social groups are more likely to delay their studies (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2015).

At the European level, with 2020 as a reference year and in countries with cohort data, on average 39% of full-time students entering a degree programme, graduated within the theoretical duration of the programme. The average completion rate after three additional years rose to 68% (OECD, 2022). In the European Commission (2015) report, titled *Dropout and Completion in Higher Education in Europe*, to deal with the phenomenon of student dropouts, the proposed policies (which also had improved results in a number of countries) were linked to student care funding, with an increase in scholarships and/or financing of studies, and with the adoption of remedial teaching (Katsardi & Staboulis, n.d.).

In the case of Greece, Stamelos (2016, 2020) uses the category of ‘students beyond the normal semesters’, which includes a group of students who delay their studies and a group of students who have given up their studies. And while the first group leads to a pan-European problem, which has been estimated to have costs for the state, the society and the stakeholders themselves, the second group, the so-called ‘perpetual students’ (see also Kalamatianou & McClean, 2003), is a theme for discussion in the Greek context only. This group inflates the number of ‘students beyond the normal semesters’ and thus affects both the teaching-learning relationship and the relevant evaluation indicators of the institutions as well as the budget of public expenditure on teaching staff, laboratories, etc.

The factors of dropping out of studies in Greece were investigated by Androulakis et. al. (2022) at the University of Patras in a sample of 696 students. The findings of this research showed that the main factors behind students’ tendency to drop out of their studies were frustration, absence from their compulsory academic duties and dissatisfaction with their subject. In contrast, the primary factors that appeared to reduce their tendency to drop out were a sense of efficacy in their studies, the perception that they were gaining valuable things from studying at university and establishing good relationships with fellow students and their professors.

In a survey conducted among students at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki on the intention to drop out of studies, the expectation of achievement in terms of the completion of studies, their intrinsic value, the value of achievement, their utilitarian value and the perceived cost of studies, the findings showed that motivational profiles with high values in success expectancy, intrinsic value, and achievement value presented lower intention to drop out. High utilitarian value was associated with higher intention to drop out, only when the other subjective value factors had low values.

Women showed a lower intention to drop out as compared to men. The results showed a negative correlation between academic performance and intention to drop out (Agorastos, 2019).

In a study carried out by Panagiotopoulos et al. (2015), the survey population was defined as the students of higher education in Greece who stayed for two years and beyond the intended years of completion of their studies. The students who should be at least in their 7th year of studies during the period of the research (academic year 2012-2013) were defined as ‘stagnant’ students. The results of the research showed that social origin was the strongest factor in the delay of studies (e.g. parental unemployment, inability to cover the cost of studies, etc.), stronger than the way of access (which was also the main question of that survey), or other factors, such as gender (men were more represented than women in the population of ‘stagnant’ students), or the so-called ‘personal and psychological’ factors.

Overall, throughout Greece, in the 2010s, the problem of ‘students beyond the normal semesters’ appeared to be major but not systemic, as it concerned: (a) specific institutions, essentially six (National and Kapodestrian University of Athens, Athens University of Economics and Business, University of Piraeus, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Agricultural University, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki); (b) specific scientific areas, especially three (Social Sciences, Economic Sciences and Management Sciences) and (c) specific Departments, and not all Departments (Stamelos, 2016; Stamelos, 2020).

In order to investigate the issue of ‘stagnant attendance of courses’, ‘perpetual’ students and dropping out of studies at Panteion University, in this research we distinguish between active and inactive students based on whether or not they were making the compulsory course declaration allowing them to participate in the exams. In this respect, as active students were considered to be those who were still making course declarations until the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The duration of studies of non-graduates was derived from their year of enrollment and the last course declaration. So, for the case of Greece, the new thing in this approach is the connection of attendance with course declarations. This takes place for the first time in research in the issue under investigation.

## **2. Methodology**

The basis for conducting the research project was the Social Statistics and Data Analysis Laboratory of the Department of Social Policy. For the thorough study of 'stagnant education', all available information from the information system of the Panteion University was to be used anonymously in accordance with what is provided for in the Code of Ethics of the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE, see Official Gazette 4187/B/19-11- 2019). The conduct of the study was approved by the Rector and the President of the Research Ethics and Ethics Committee of Panteion University. The duration of the project was from February 2022 until May 2023.

As the operation of the Department of Social Policy (after the division of the Department of Social Policy and Anthropology) began in the academic year 2004-2005, and in order to have comparability between academic years, the analysis was based on the years 2004-2021.

## **2.1 The data collection**

The research team requested from the information system of Panteion University the following data for the Department of Social Policy and for a period of twenty years: registration number, gender, date of birth, marital status, employment status, parents' education level, citizenship, Department selection ranking, year of enrollment, year of graduation, method of enrollment and annual declarations of course selection by students. The data was provided in the form of two excel files, in March 2022. They provided data from the beginning of the functioning of what used to be called the Department of Social Policy and Social Anthropology, in the academic year 1990-1991. The first file contained the following 19 variables with data up to February 2022: registration number, prefecture of residence, city of residence, date of registration, date of degree received, degree grade, gender, date of birth, citizenship, city of birth, occupational status, marital status, occupation of parents, mode of admission / category of study, semester of study, pass order and admission grade. The second file contained register numbers, year of declaration and number of courses up to the spring semester of 2021. Of course, the data of the first file is recorded during the registration of students and is therefore out of date without the possibility of updating it.

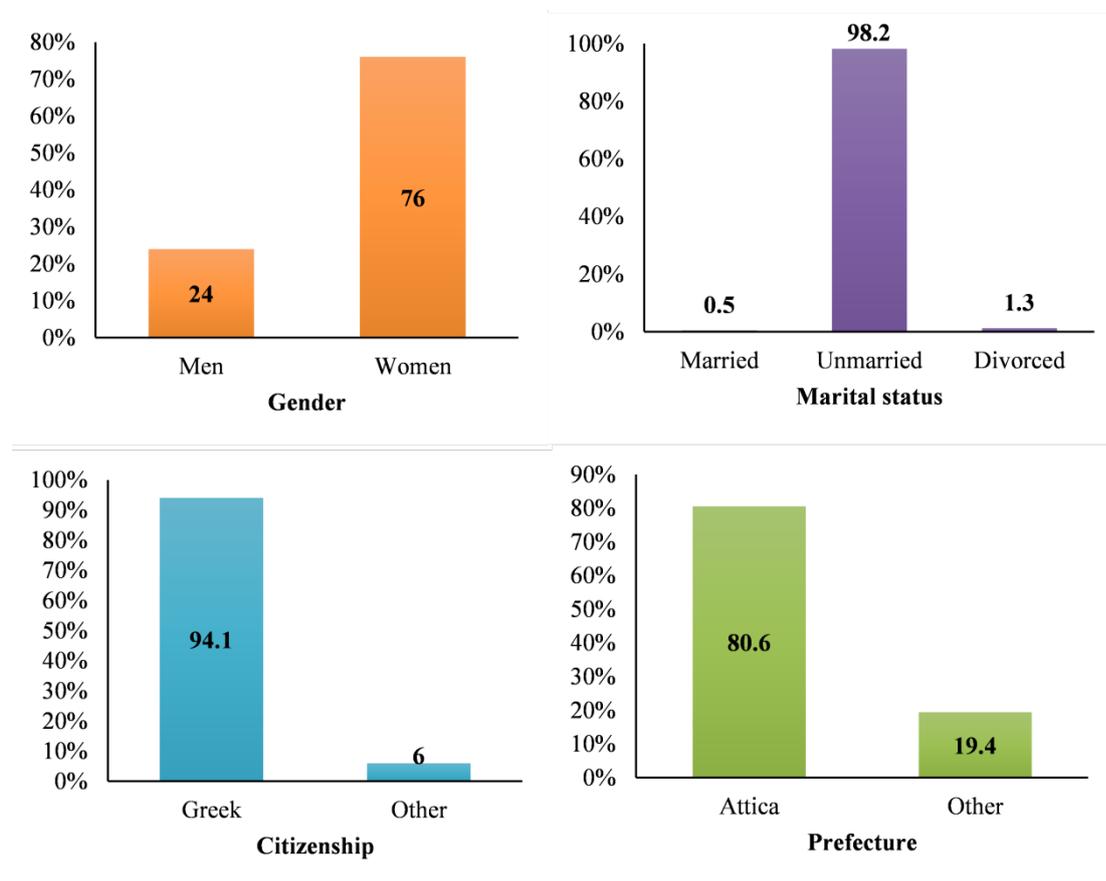
The existence of two distinct files, one file with a separate entry per student and one file with multiple entries per register, made the process and the linking of the information difficult as a whole. At the same time, high percentages of missing values were identified in the variables of professional status (97.4%), family status (56.0%),

parents' professional status (94.1%), the order of success (48.5%) and the admission degree (52.0%).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 The demographic and social characteristics of students and graduates

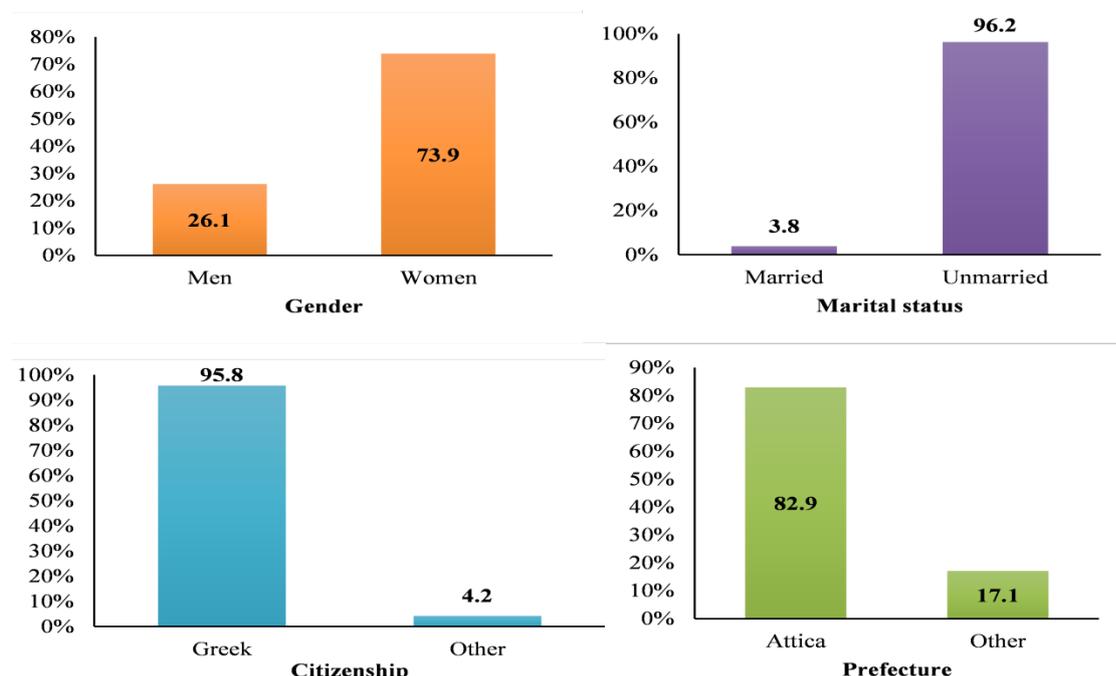
According to the data, from January 2004 to February 2022, the Department of Social Policy has enrolled 2,802 students, of whom 1,236 (44.1%) have received a bachelor's degree. Figure 1 shows the demographic and social characteristics of the Department's graduates, the majority of whom are women, single, with Greek citizenship, who live in the prefecture of Attica. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A1).



**Figure 1.** Graduates' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

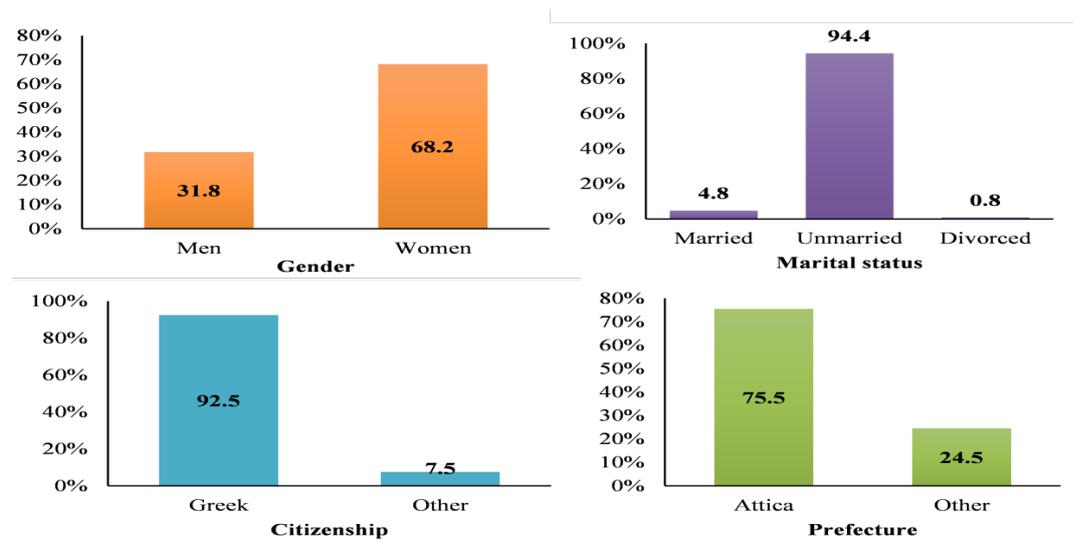
Figure 2 presents the social and demographic characteristics of the Department's active students who, have not received a degree yet, but went on declaring courses until

the year 2021. The majority are women, single, with Greek citizenship, who live in the prefecture of Attica. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A2).



**Figure 2.** Active students' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

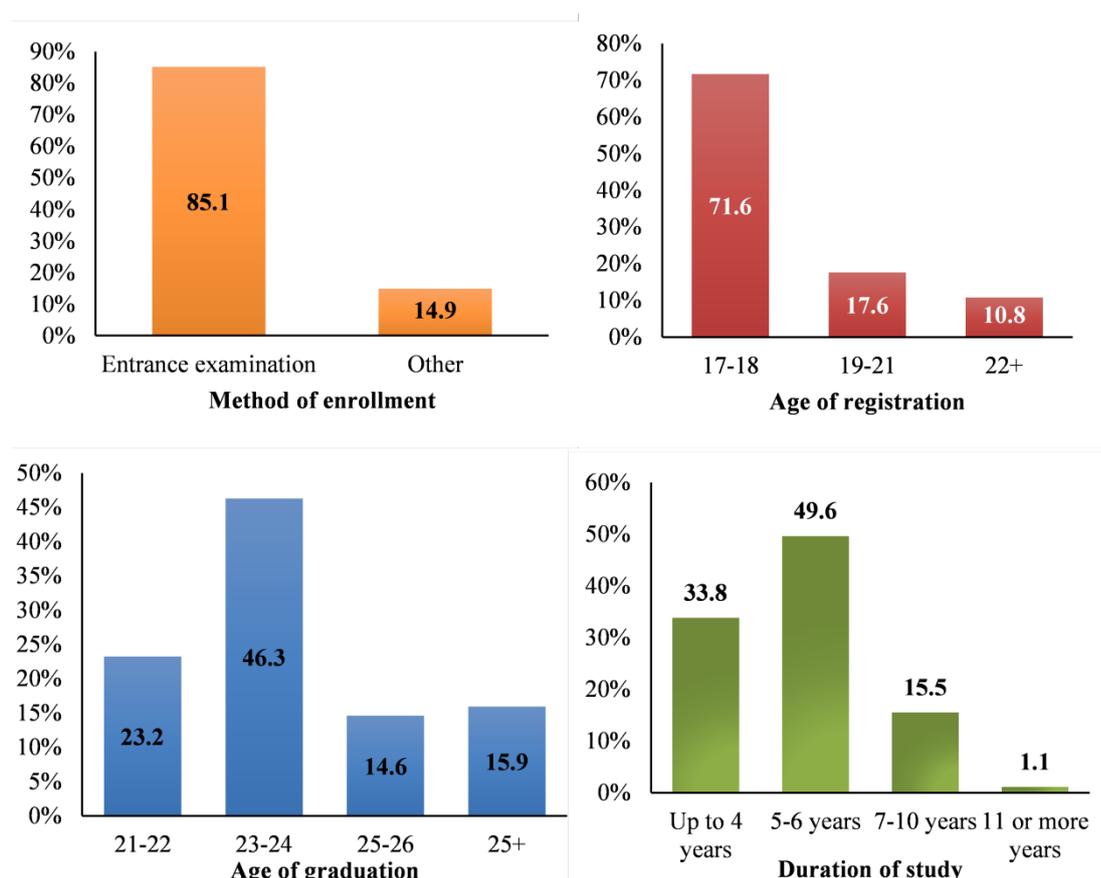
Figure 3 presents the demographic and social characteristics of inactive students/dropouts. The majority are women, single, with Greek citizenship, who live in the prefecture of Attica. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A3).



**Figure 3.** Inactive students/dropouts' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2020

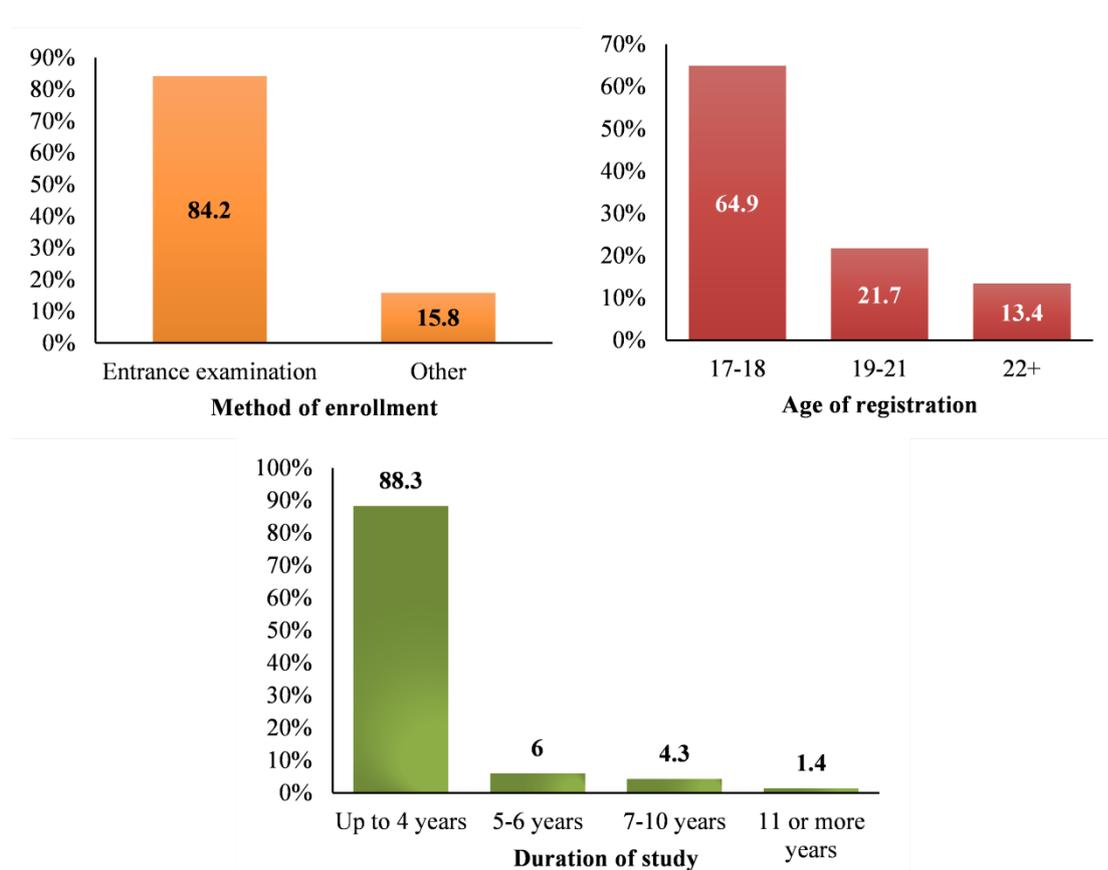
### 3.2 Students' and graduates' duration of study

Figure 4 presents the duration of studies of the graduates of the Department. The majority have been admitted through entrance examinations with the age of registration mainly up to the age of 18, with the age of obtaining a degree mainly 23-24 years and the duration of studies mainly 5-6 years. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A4).



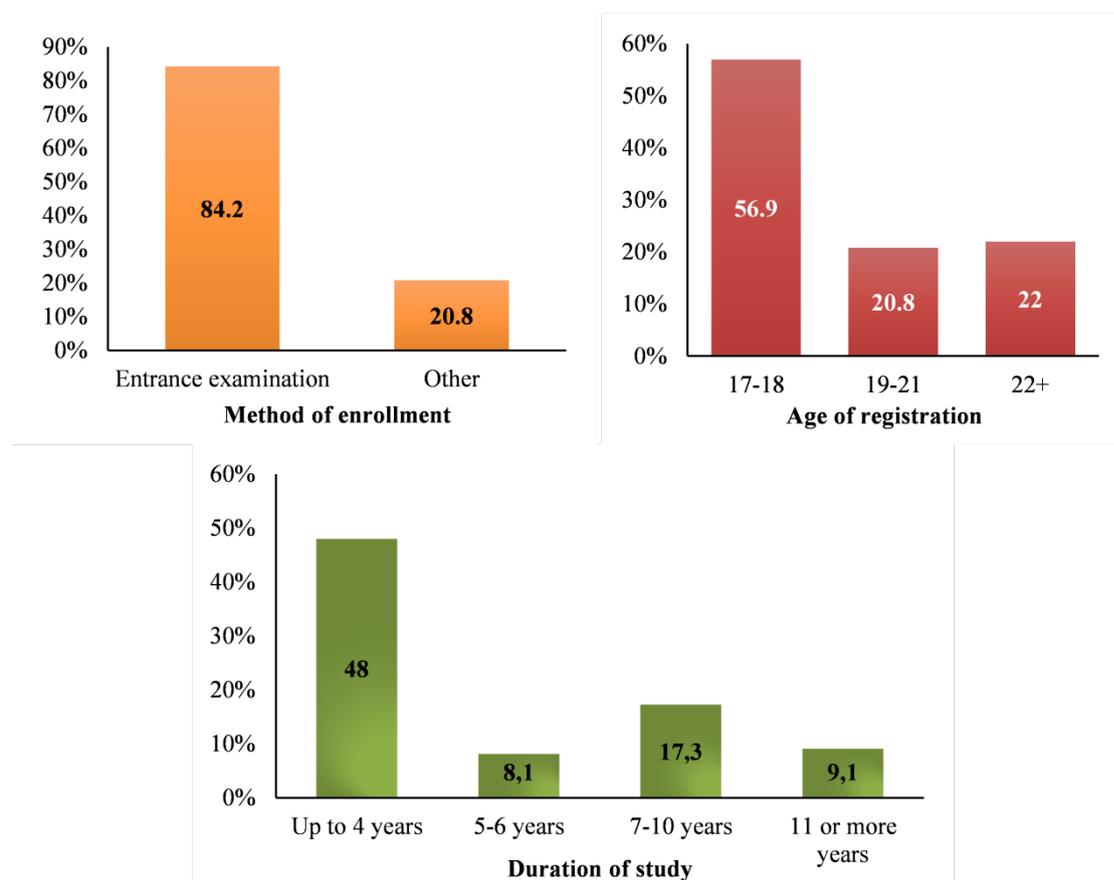
**Figure 4.** Graduates' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

Figure 5 presents active students' duration of study. The majority have been admitted through entrance examinations and with a registration age of mostly up to 18 years of age. The duration of studies of non-graduates is determined by the year of their registration and the last declaration of courses. A small percentage (5.7%) continues to make course declarations after seven (7) or more years of study. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A5).



**Figure 5.** Active students' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

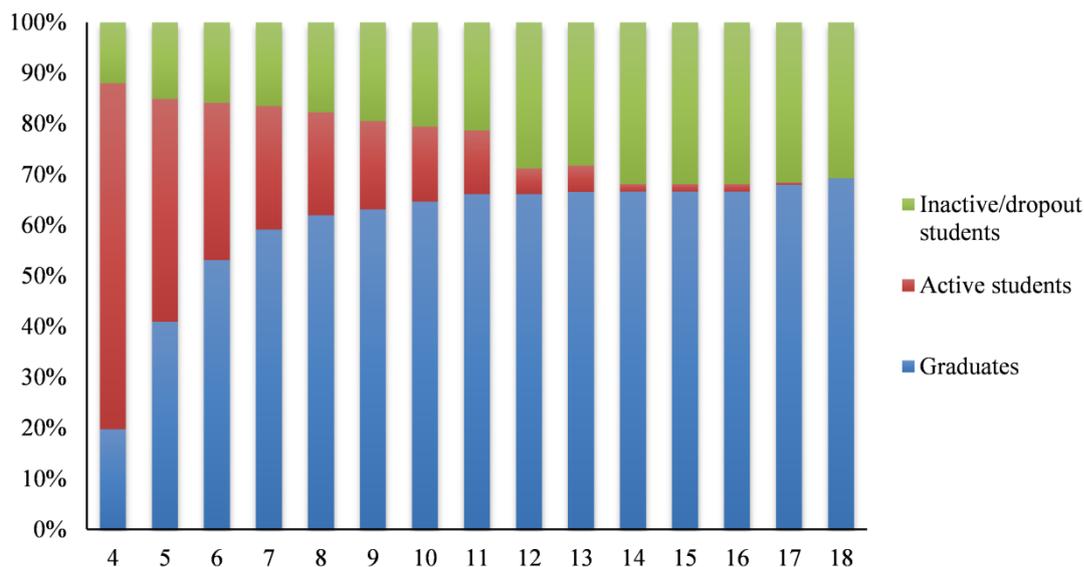
Figure 6 presents the duration of studies of the inactive students, i.e., those students who no longer make course declarations. The majority have been admitted through entrance examinations and with a registration age of mostly up to 18 years of age. The duration of studies of non-graduates is determined by the year of their registration and the last course declaration. A large percentage (48.0%) stops making course declarations within the first four years of study. Of these inactive students, 17.5% never made declaration of courses. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix (Table A6).



**Figure 6.** Inactive/dropouts' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2020

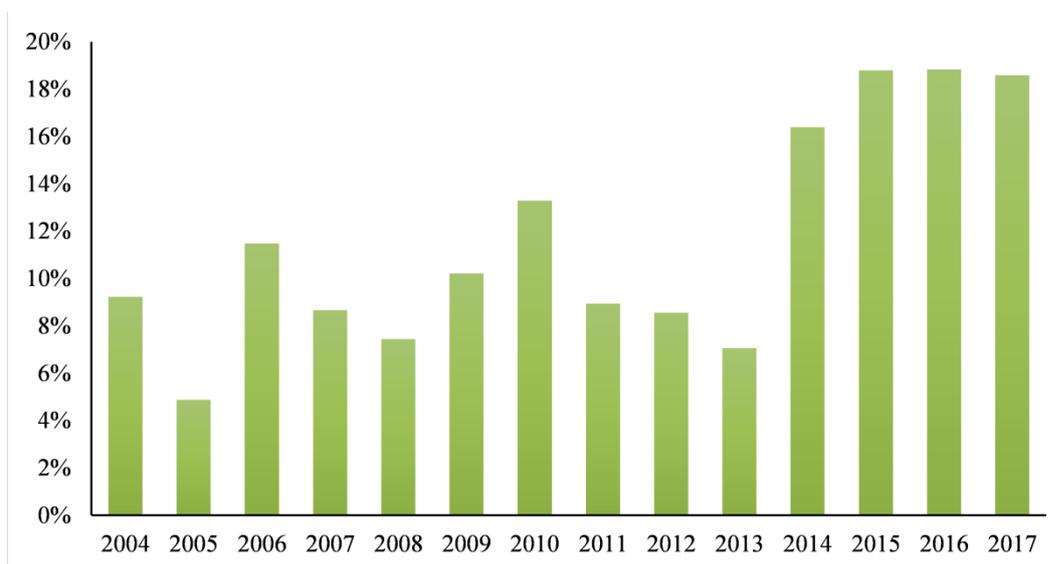
### 3.3 Students' and graduates' duration of studies: Empirical research data analysis – aggregate results

Indicatively, Figure 7 presents the percentages of graduates, non-graduates still declaring course selection, including non-graduates who delay their studies and inactive students, by length of study. As shown, by the eleven (11) years of study, 2/3 of the students have received a degree, a ratio that does not change significantly until the eighteen (18) years of study. As the years of study increase, the percentages of non-graduates who leave their studies increase as well, while the percentages of non-graduates who make declarations of course selection decrease (and the percentages of non-graduates who leave their studies increase). From the twelve (12) years of study onwards, the percentages in all three categories of students seem to stabilise and almost the remaining 1/3 of students abandon their studies.

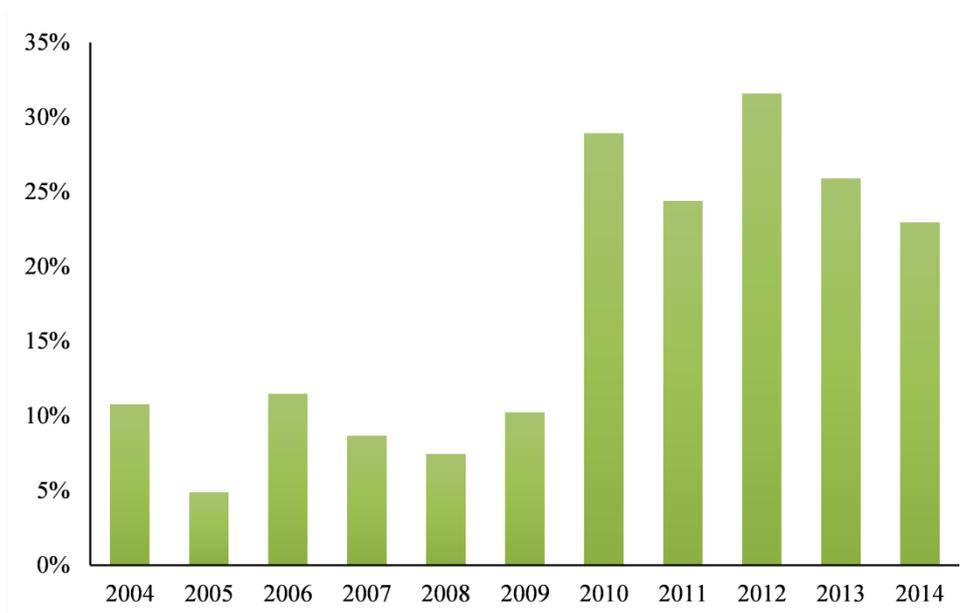


**Figure 7.** Graduates, active and inactive/dropout students based on duration of study

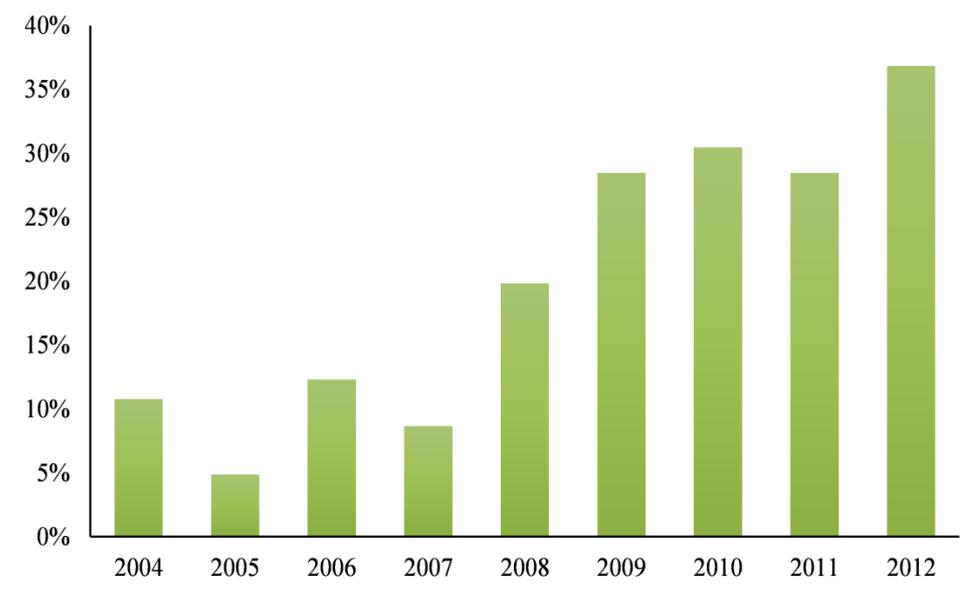
Focusing on dropout students, Figures 8, 9 and 10 present this category of students by year of enrollment after four (4), eight (8) and ten (10) years of study, respectively.



**Figure 8.** Students' dropping out after four years of study per year of registration



**Figure 9.** Students' dropping out after eight years of study per year of registration



**Figure 10.** Students' dropping out after ten years of study per year of registration

It is found that in the period of registration years 2004-2007, the percentages after four (4), eight (8) and ten (10) years of study range from 5-12% and do not change significantly per year of registration. Accordingly, in the period of registration years 2004-2009, the percentages after four (4) and eight (8) years of study also do not change significantly per year of registration. The strong increase in students' dropping out is

mainly found from the registration year 2010, after eight (8) years of study and from the registration year 2009 after ten (10) years of study, with rates ranging from 23-37%.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

In this study, in order to investigate the issue of ‘stagnant attendance of courses’, ‘perpetual’ students and dropping out of studies at Panteion University, we distinguished between active and inactive students based on whether or not they were making the compulsory course declaration allowing them to participate in the exams. In this respect, for the first time in relevant research, by linking attendance to course declarations, the findings showed that the so-called ‘stagnant’ or ‘perpetual’ students are non-graduates who have abandoned their studies, i.e. dropouts.

Regarding the demographic and social characteristics of dropouts, the findings showed that the majority are women, single, with Greek citizenship, residing in the prefecture of Attica. Since the majority of students, graduates and non-graduates of the Department of Social Policy have the same characteristics, these data do not give us clear conclusions regarding the gender that is overrepresented in dropping out of studies. Also, they do not give us information about the social origin of non-graduate students who have abandoned their studies.

However, the processing of the data concerning the duration of studies of the students and graduates of the Department of Social Policy is an indication of the complexity of the phenomenon of delaying or abandoning of university studies. The reasons of students’ dropping out of studies can be numerous and also have to do with the institutional framework of higher education and the changes that have occurred in it with respect to certain reforms, but also with issues associated with the broader socio-economic and political context within which the higher education reforms took place, as well as with the response of the actors that make up the target population of this research.

So, it is interesting to note in the overall findings that after twelve (12) years of study, 1/3 of students drop out of their studies. In particular, in the period of registration years 2004-2007, the percentages of non-graduates who have abandoned their studies after four (4), eight (8) and ten (10) years of study range from 5-12% and do not change significantly per year of registration, while in the period of registration years 2004-2009, the percentages after four (4) and eight (8) years of study also do not change

significantly per year of registration. The strong increase in students who leave their studies is found mainly from the registration year 2010 after eight (8) years of study and from the registration year 2009 after ten (10) years of study, with percentages ranging from 23-37%. Therefore, the issue of dropping out of studies becomes more intense in the 2010s, a decade characterised by the phenomenon of the economic crisis in Greece.

Of course, dropping out of studies should be approached taking into account the context of the widespread massification of higher education, which in Greece was carried out successively. After the first wave of enrollment growth in the 1980s and the second wave of (tremendous) growth in the 1990s, opportunities multiplied, albeit with social inequalities still being reproduced. The widening of participation was mainly in technological higher education and some university departments of theoretical sciences with lower social demand (offering degrees linked to alternative employment or under-employment) and therefore with larger numbers of lower-performing students (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2005). In the 2000s, ‘mass’ higher education contributed to the inflation and degradation of degrees and exacerbated social inequalities through complex processes linked to the internal differentiation of higher education, labour market conditions, and the way students from different social classes understand and plan their transition to the labour market (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). The increasing trend, in terms of the number of students, continued in the 2010s but with a simultaneous decrease in the number of university professors in the conditions of economic crisis (Katsardi & Staboulis, n.d.). A study that examined aspects of diversity, inequalities and inclusion in Greek higher education, at the end of the 2010s, showed that undergraduate students, especially female students and students who had not completed their studies on time, expressed rather moderate views on the effectiveness of the support measures provided in their studies (Tzafea et al., 2020).

The fact that the issue of dropping out of studies in the Department of Social Policy became more intense in the 2010s, a period of economic and social crisis in Greece, needs further investigation. It should be noted that the deep recession was accompanied, in addition to the high unemployment rates, by effects on essential parameters in the organisation and operation of the higher education institutions of the country (freezing of appointments of new faculty members, reduction of administrative staff, reductions in salaries of faculty members, reduction of funding, abolition and mergers of Departments, reduction of research funds, etc.) (Pasias & Prokou, 2022). At the same time, although since the 2000s, under the influence of the European

educational policy (Bologna Process), through laws 3374/2005 and 3549/2007, the efficiency and effectiveness of Greek universities had been emphasised, with the state focusing on the achievement of criteria to ensure measurable ‘quality’ of higher education institutions (Prokou, 2011), these developments intensified in the 2010s. Through Law 4009/2011, the influences of European policies (Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy) were related to issues such as: a) the mobility, attractiveness and internationalisation of the University; b) the promotion of lifelong learning and certification policies through the generalisation of the ECTS and the introduction of the EQF; c) quality assurance and accountability; d) the promotion of the ‘new public management’; e) the connection of education and research with the labour market; f) the promotion of interdisciplinarity, innovation and excellence; g) the reduction of state funding linked to the results of evaluation.

The dominance of extrinsic values was expressed through concepts such as ‘university productivity’, ‘responsiveness to the market’, ‘academic capitalism’, the attribution of greater ‘managerial autonomy’ to institutions to achieve specific and pre-determined goals, ‘evaluation’ – ‘quality’ assurance, ‘accountability’. These concepts were an expression of the ‘evaluative state’ model that refers to changes in the structures and procedures of administration and management of universities, and to aspects of privatisation. Due to the effects of the European education policy, these concepts set a framework for the interpretation of the policies promoted also by law 4485/2017, although the latter was distinguished for greater concern about social issues, e.g. emphasis on free education in postgraduate courses (Prokou, 2021). However, privatisation trends, as they are intensifying over time, undermine the aim of equity. The demand for ‘equality of educational opportunity’ had dominated in the 1980s and the 1990s, with the massification of higher education. But since the mid-2000s, the State’s interest has shifted from the issue of ‘equality’ to the issues of ‘quality’ and ‘efficiency’ of the higher education system. Emphasis has been placed to remote control and the ‘outputs’, in shaping the ‘entrepreneurial university’, in the decrease of funding, in the individualisation of the responsibility for learning (Prokou, 2011; Prokou, 2019).

This context sets the imperative for the creation of a framework to support students to complete their studies within a reasonable period of time. In addition to the required wider (that is, socio-economic and political) development which would be encouraging in the direction of timely completion of studies, the State should assume an important role when it comes to the financial support of higher education institutions

(and in this case, Panteion University) for strengthening the human and material resources that will contribute to more effective learning structures and processes, as well as to a more satisfactory student life in all of its aspects.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Graduates' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Men	297	24.0
Women	939	76.0
Marital status		
Married	5	0.4
Unmarried	391	31.6
Divorced	2	0.2
Missing values	838	67.8
Citizenship		
Greek	1,156	93.5
Other	73	5.9
Missing values	7	0.6
Prefecture		
Attica	808	65.4
Other	194	15.7
Missing values	234	18.9

*N* = 1,236.

**Table A2.** Active students' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Men	205	26.1
Women	579	73.9
Marital status		
Married	10	1.3
Unmarried	251	32.0
Divorced	0	0.0
Missing values	523	66.7
Citizenship		
Greek	640	81.6
Other	28	3.6
Missing values	116	14.8
Prefecture		
Attica	145	18.5
Other	30	3.8
Missing values	609	77.7

*N* = 784.

**Table A3.** Inactive students/dropouts' sociodemographic characteristics: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2020

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Men	249	31.8
Women	533	68.2
Marital status		
Married	12	1.5
Unmarried	234	29.9
Divorced	2	0.3
Missing values	534	68.3
Citizenship		
Greek	693	88.5
Other	56	7.2
Missing values	33	4.3
Prefecture		
Attica	376	48.1
Other	122	15.6
Missing values	284	36.3

*N* = 782.

**Table A4.** Graduates' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Method of enrollment		
Entrance examination	1,052	85.1
Other	184	14.9
Age of registration		
17-18	885	71.6
19-21	217	17.6
22+	134	10.8
Age of graduation		
21-22	287	23.2
23-24	571	46.3
25-26	181	14.6
25+	197	15.9
Duration of study		
Up to 4 years	418	33.8
5-6 years	614	49.6
7-10 years	191	15.5
11 or more years	13	1.1

*N* = 1,236.

**Table A5.** Active students' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2021

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Method of enrollment		
Entrance examination	660	84.2
Other	124	15.8
Age of registration		
17-18	509	64.9
19-21	170	21.7
22+	105	13.4
Duration of study (based on last declaration)		
Up to 4 years	692	88.3
5-6 years	47	6.0
7-10 years	34	4.3
11 or more years	11	1.4

*N* = 784.

**Table A6.** Inactive/dropouts' duration of study: Panteion University, Department of Social Policy, 2004-2020

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Method of enrollment		
Entrance examination	619	84.2
Other	163	20.8
Age of registration		
17-18	445	56.9
19-21	163	20.8
22+	172	22.0
Missing values	2	0.3
Duration of study (based on last declaration)		
Up to 4 years	376	48.0
5-6 years	63	8.1
7-10 years	135	17.3
11 or more years	71	9.1
Missing values	137	17.5

*N* = 782.