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Editorial Special Issue Academia
Higher Education in the Face of Multiple Crises

It was with great interest that I accepted an invitation from Professor George Stamelos, University of Patras to host, as an editor, a Special Issue on crises and transformations of European Higher Education systems. I was slightly puzzled, at the immediate willingness of esteemed colleagues from prestigious European Higher Education Institutions to contribute to this Special Issue. I came to conclude that the topic was one in which colleagues felt personally, as well as professionally involved. Crises and transformations, and the contestation that accompanies them, have touched us all.

The last 20 years have seen rapid transformations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Europe and beyond, affecting the cross-border circulation of ideas, knowledge production, people and practices. These trends – along with contingent circumstances such as economic downturns, pandemics, and wars – have generated multiple crises, which, if anything, are becoming sharper.

The transformations involved are complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, engaging with global discourses of teaching and research enables policy learning, shifting patterns of academic prestige, and research dissemination. On the other hand such developments increase managerial influence on academic practice. They generate pressures on individual institutions and in some senses on whole nations: competitive university rankings, are taken as a signal of excellence in both national and international arenas. At the same time, perceived geopolitical security threats and culture wars have eroded established meanings of academic freedom (e.g. in terms of what can be taught and researched) and have affected the formation of academic identities as well as academic mobility.

The 2008 economic crisis and its ongoing effects have impacted on Higher Education systems, not least in the countries of the European South, where varied forms of marketisation/privatization are seen as important for survival. At the same time, the Coronavirus pandemic provided impetus to further privatisation especially in the form of the digitalization of teaching and learning. As governments seek to respond to these now familiar crises by aligning Higher Education more closely with what are perceived to be global economic needs - for example through the European National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) - the sector is facing new challenges around its relationship with the national state, its publics, and supranational agencies. Governments of the centre and right, especially, are much more likely, now, to question institutional autonomy and academic freedom, regarding them as obstructions to achieving contemporary economic and political goals. As I write these lines the Italian government is in dispute with the University of Bologna over the University's decision not to run a philosophy programme for army officers. For the government, this decision is 'ideological'; for the University it is a matter of academic autonomy.

This Special Issue reflects on these multiple and interlocking changes, focusing specifically on the ways in which crises and transformations have been experienced in Sweden, UK, Poland, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Spain. The seven contributions to the Special Issue are both theoretical and empirical.

Like other authors in this collection, Antonio Benedito Casanova and José Beltrán Llavador are concerned to understand the structural changes that have reshaped European universities in the twenty-first century. Working with great sophistication among various traditions of critical theory, they analyse the contribution of national and international ranking systems to a diminution of the social and cultural character of university education and its replacement by social and economic priorities which make human capital the essential force of economic development. With particular attention to the experience of Spain, they show how apparatuses of ranking and comparison have shifted from their initial descriptive function to become instruments of prescription, 'tools of standardisation and power', that provide a means for the surveillance and disciplining of the university workforce. The demand that universities assess their work comparatively, in grandiose league tables that apply to every aspect of an institution's work, serves as a 'kind of control and self-control apparatus'. In competing to be ranked among world-class universities, institutions lose their connection to a territorial environment and become distant from what was once their social milieu and the cultural

and political system of which they were once part. Expert government by numbers, Casanova and Llavador point out, has always been an alternative to democratic government by law. Ranking systems have reinforced this tyranny of numbers, removing considerations of the intrinsic value of university teaching and research, and leaving academics 'enmeshed in a process of alienation'.

Turning to Central Europe, Sylwia Męcfal and Adriana Surmiak critically examine the current state of Polish public universities, especially their gradual adaptation to neoliberal forms of governance post-1989. The authors are particularly concerned with the continuing impact - especially on the humanities and social sciences - of the reforms enacted by post-2007 governments. Central to these reforms is a proclaimed concern for academic freedom which they define as 'freedom from state intervention in both research and teaching'. The authors employ in a skilful and innovative way the Polish sociologist Jan Lutynki's concept of 'apparent actions' to argue that many contemporary practices simulate the attainment of certain goals, often associated with the core values of academic freedom – the pursuit of truth, collegiality, independence. They use two examples: 'the fetishization of points' in individual and institutional academic evaluation (whereby merit is mainly measured by points awarded for publications in high-ranking journals, often international and in English); and the use of learning outcomes in determining teaching effectiveness, which they refer to as a 'bureaucratic requirement in teaching'. They claim that the hybridization of governance models in Polish academia has produced structural ambivalence, undermining both established academic values and the coherence of recent reforms.

Like Męcfal and Sumiak, Martyn Hammersley closely examines the concept of academic freedom, in his case, comparing and contrasting it with the concept of free speech. He argues that although the two concepts are closely connected, they need to be clearly distinguished, and highlights some of their complexities arising in their application in different contexts - complexities that stem from their different histories but also from their relationship with the nature of academic task. Academic freedom, for Hammersley, is a form of professional autonomy, whereas free speech is a civil right. Commitment to this model, he maintains, is preferable to prioritising the economic functions of higher education or defining the purpose of the university in terms of political or communal goals. It is a principle which will at times be compromised, but it remains important, in present conditions to defend it and the liberal model of the university with which it is associated.

Anna Traianou takes us to the Higher Education system of the UK, which she treats as an 'exemplary case'. She provides an analysis of the changing relationship between universities and the state and how this has provided conditions for the emergence and establishment of internationalisation as a vital strategy for survival which also contained within itself the seeds of destabilisation. UK higher education, she argues, is shaped by both an internationalised and now faltering business strategy and by the contested consequences of Britain's geopolitical and military choices. Internationalisation is perceived to give rise to new risks, a perception which is linked to policies of securitisation, thus threatening academic freedom. By placing securitisation policies in the context of internationalisation, Traianou considers the significance of the *Prevent Duty* for academic freedom and for the recruitment of international students. At the same time, international recruitment, formerly seen as an essential financial resource, is increasingly viewed by policy-makers as compromising both immigration policies and those concerned with international security. UK higher education, she argues has not found a way of overcoming these difficulties and unless changes take place at Government level its new reluctance to prioritise international recruitment will lead to adapt aggressive austerity policies. Many Universities have announced voluntary or compulsory redundancies in order to reduce academic staff expenses. Strikes and mobilisations are a sign of the level of discontent.

Nafsika Alexiadou addresses the multiple crises of European HE policy and, particularly, of Sweden. Alexiadou places her contribution in a conceptual context of 'polycrisis' defined by European Commission President Juncker (2016) as a combination-of simultaneous economic, financial, social, and security challenges across different policy domains. She argues that the nature of 'polycrisis' differs according to national context. Swedish shifts in discourses and practices in relation to HE internationalisation should be seen as a response to the perceived geopolitical and security threats which frame national policies on academic mobility. Drawing on a large qualitative study Alexiadou analyses the mobility experience of individual academics who develop careers in often difficult circumstances and highlights the need to integrate individual experiences and perceptions with HE-wide policies and discourses. Polycrises impact on national structures, but they are also lived by individuals.

Sofia Viseu and Mariana Gaio Alves draw on the concept of 'social imaginaries' to examine recovery efforts during times of crisis, with a particular emphasis on the

NextGeneration European Union (NGEU) initiative. Their article considers the centrality and uniqueness of the NGEU in the European Union's crisis response and the ways in which this initiative has been developed at the national level. They draw on the EU's double mission of Higher Education - both educating/training people and producing scientific knowledge. Analysing four European National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) from Southern European countries - Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain - the study intends to contribute to the uncovering of regional and national specificities that persist in the framework of a hegemonic transnational narrative about HE as an economic asset. Using a discourse analytic approach the authors argue that national recovery agendas have reactivated longstanding neoliberal visions of society and the economy. The analysis of the Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish NRRPs reveals that despite some differences in policy framing and implementation, all four share a common emphasis on maximizing human capital and entrepreneurial capacity as the primary role of HE. Thus, rather than acting as a moment for reimagining, the crisis seems to have been seized by these four countries as an opportunity to deepen utilitarian and market-driven logics already embedded within European HE policy.

Dionysios Gouvias takes us to Greece. After the kick-start of the so-called "Bologna Process" (1999) and within the first two decades of its application in Greek Higher Education (from 2005 and thereafter), a series of radical "restructuring" measures of Greek Higher Education Institutions began to unfold. The measures introduced (legislative and other), have not been based on a structured and open public debate, nor on decisions taken by institutionalized, competent and mandatory public authorities. Though seeming to lack a popular or professional legitimacy, they have pursued with determination a number of objectives from Greek HEIs:1) reduction of public funding, 2) shrinking (qualitative & quantitative) of public HEIs, 3) introduction of private HEIs (something prohibited until 2025 by the Greek Constitution), and 4) promotion of a "competitiveness" ethos and commodification of the study programs of HEIs. The "glue" that runs through these four targets is the evaluation (the so-called "quality assurance") and accreditation of HEIs. Through a critical examination of official regulations (laws) and "consultation texts", both of the respective governments and of institutionalized "independent authorities" that oversee evaluation in HE, Gouvias places the various institutional changes within a given spatial-temporal framework so that long-term strategies of specific educational policies become apparent, both at the national and international level, especially as regards the European

Union (EU) policy for Higher Education and Research. The analysis also stresses issues arising from the globalization of educational policy-making and of the homogenization of evaluation practices in HE across the EU and highlights the role of the Greek "regulatory state" in these developments.

Taken together, the articles offer a challenging and critical approach to policy-makers' choices in a time of multiple crises. I would like to thank the contributing authors for their fascinating contributions, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on draft papers. Special thanks also go to Professor Emerita Anna Tsatsaroni, University of Peloponnese and Dr Antigone Sarakinitoti, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for their comments as Discussants during the Symposium we held at the Annual Conference of the European Educational Research Association at the University of Belgrade in September 2025.

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