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## **Higher education expansion and social inequalities: the Greek graduates' pathways to the labour market.**

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### **Background**

Over the last century government policies all over the world have been trying to expand higher education. Human capital theory argues that education is an investment for both individuals and the states and an educated population is a productive population as education increases the productivity and efficiency of workers. This is the reason why wider populations of labour market entrants have been encouraged to have degrees. Both the higher education system and the labour market have witnessed major changes and these changes have a straightforward effect on graduates' job opportunities. The expansion of higher education has been particularly rapid in all western countries and it is the main reason the graduates face difficulties during their transition from education to work. Since the number of graduates who are trying to enter the labour market has multiplied, the competition between graduates for appropriate jobs has become more intense. This situation has led to heated debates among scientists, educators, economists and all those concerned with the relationship between higher education and labour market. Are graduates participating in an increasingly global economy where knowledge is the key to competitive success or is there evidence that only a few have benefited from the existing situation?

During the last decade there have been crucial changes in the Greek higher education too. The expansion of higher education as well as the number of entrants is impressive. The rates of participation have been increasing in a large extent in the name of social mobility and equality of opportunity. However, it seems that educational inequalities persist moving up from the educational ladder to the labour market. According to the official rhetoric, in Greece there is equality of educational opportunities and access to higher education for all students regardless of their social class although there has been little evidence about the extent to which graduates use the skills and knowledge acquired in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

This study is trying to investigate the relationship between higher education and the transition of graduates to the labour market in terms of the conceptions as to the capacity of higher education to reduce social inequalities. Its aim was to explore the graduates' experiences five to seven years after their graduation and if their transition to the labour market was affected by their social background. The main research questions addressed were: a) what is the graduates' present state of work and b) did the factor social class affect the graduates' pathways to the labour market?

### **Methods**

We used a qualitative method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were administered on twenty university graduates from different universities of the country. The qualitative analysis of the data gave us evidence about their studies, their transition to work, their competencies and their careers after graduation as well as their evaluations about the relationship between education and work. We also examined their demographic characteristics and the relationship between their socioeconomic status and their route to the labour market.

### **Frame**

The theoretical framework we used draws on Pierre Bourdieu's reproduction theory, according to which inflation of educational credentials reflects changing social characteristics of the people who

possess the qualifications. People coming from families with a rich social, cultural and economic capital obtain access to the best educational opportunities and careers and enjoy substantial advantages in the labour market. Social and network resources are also likely to promote those with a 'good' social background even if their educational attainment is similar to others'. Consequently, social background does not stop affecting labour market opportunities when it comes to finding a good job and social inequalities are reproduced.

### **Research findings**

Research findings suggest that graduates coming from working or middle classes were not able to find a permanent job with a good salary. They invested in their education in order to secure a job and upward social mobility, a belief deeply rooted in the Greek society, but they finally fell into the trap of the inflation of credentials. The result is that they are struggling to survive in jobs irrelevant to the subject of their studies and they are working either part-time or full time with very low wages. Some of them are even unemployed. Most of the respondents stated that they would prefer a job in the public sector even with lower wages as private sector does not provide them security. Few of them coming from higher classes were found with better high status and well-paid jobs. They stated that they had no difficulty in finding a job after their graduation as their parents had helped them in doing so.

The answer to our research questions is that social reproduction is taking place not only inside but also outside the educational system. The expansion of higher education that promised to give equal opportunities within the educational system has not been enough to ensure a good future career for graduates. Job opportunities in the labour market are becoming different for different social groups. The problem seems to be bigger in Greece as it is a country where the economy and the private sector are not developed and there is no social policy. The solution to the problem would be a welfare state with strong social policy trying to face unemployment and give an end to the persisting inequalities.