



PRIVATE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN GREECE: DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS OVER THE LAST DECADE

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Abstract

The course of the past decade in the field of privately operated university education in Greece reflects several types of drastic change, first of all due to the transformative socio-economic circumstances, policy changes, and alterations in world trends in higher learning. Although public universities have long prevailed in the Greek higher education environment, the contribution of the private institutions has increased with the ability to provide diversified frameworks of academic courses, spreading internationalization, and adapting to the demands of the labor market. This paper gives an in-depth analysis of the trends and changes that took place in the Greek private universities between the year 2015 to 2025, combining the use of statistical data, policy publications, and academic literature. The examination involved how provision was changing, enrollment patterns, quality assurance processes, and the wider regulatory environment. The results show that privatized institutions have been undergoing continued growth in terms of student numbers, especially in specific and professionally inclined sectors, aided by specific marketing campaigns and the establishment of English-based programs. Nevertheless, there are still problems, such as the legal limit in recognition of degrees, competition with state institutions, and inequities of access related to socio-economic status. The research paper also explains the correlation between the limitations of national policy and the international tendency in the process of higher education liberalization. It has a final section that gives policy recommendations to help increase the contribution of the private universities in the Greek knowledge economy, maintain quality assurance, and increase equity of access to the various student groups.

Keywords

private universities; higher education policy; Greece; educational reform; enrollment trends; quality assurance; higher education market; educational equity

Introduction

University education plays the crucial role of the pillar of national development that defines human capital, leads to innovations, and carries on the socio-economic advances. The higher education system in Greece used to be occupied with public universities that were sufficiently safeguarded constitutionally and they are furnished by the state as well

as are given special privileges with regards to the awarding of nationally acknowledged degrees (Dimarogonas, 1995). This hegemony has established itself in Article 16 of the Greek Constitution that does not allow the establishment of private universities that have full recognition. Although there are providers of private higher education found within the existing system, which are colleges, vocational institutes, or subsidiaries of foreign universities, they are traditionally outside the national accreditation system, and such a system is a dual-tier one (Kremmyda, 2013; Prokou, 2013).

The past trend of Greek higher education illustrates a uniform state preference in posts being provided. After the reform in 1976, governance became centralized and the state retained a close control and supervision over the curricula, admissions and staffing (Georgiadis, 2005). In the late 20th century, the issue of increasing bookings in the volume of public universities was given priority in an attempt to broaden the access and wage educational equity (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004). At the same time, the private institutions lingered on the fringe and they were also viewed to be catering to a niche market, with compact legal scope (Gouvias, 2007).

Nonetheless, the past 10 years (2015-2025) has been characterized by drastic social-economic and policy-related shifts that transformed the working milieu of the private universities in Greece. Side-products of the financial crisis of 2008 and beyond included less money to universities, overcrowded infra-structures, and increased competition over scarce funds (Kantzara, 2016). At the same time, the crisis of unemployment among graduates and the necessity of the labor market-oriented programs gave a possibility to the private school institutions to present themselves as more flexible and industry-based ones (Tsakloglou & Cholezas, 2004). The mentioned developments were accompanied by worldwide changes in higher education, including the Bologna Process, internationalization, and the rapid growth of online learning that, altogether, promoted diversification of delivery and curriculum structure (Usher, 2009; Tilak, 2008).

The response of private universities in Greece has been to establish specific courses in sectors that have a high need like business administration, hospitality, information technology and the creative arts (Moiras et al., 2019). Some of them have established alliances with globally recognized universities, and as a result, both dual-degree programs have been introduced that will not be limited by the local degree validation but also improve the prospects of employing students after graduation (Fotopoulos et al., 2019). The propagation of English-taught programs has been a product of this positioning strategy of several features of world higher-education, which promotes the inflow of international students in the country, mainly those originating in Europe, the Balkans, and Asia (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019).

In spite of these improvements, we still have issues. The cost of education in the private universities has presented a real challenge to the low-income families and this has increased the education disparity (Tsakloglou & Cholezas, 2004). In addition, the fact that the Greek state does not recognize the degrees offered by private universities impedes graduate mobility and is a factor that restricts employment in the country in the public sector (Kremmyda, 2013). Discussions have been going on at policy level on the topic of constitutional reform where some people have said that legalising individual colleges would mean more competition and innovation whereas others have expressed concern that this would mean weakening the provision of the public sector in terms of ensuring equal opportunity (Gouvias, 2007).

In this context, there are three major research questions which are going to be answered in this study:

- What has changed in the past ten years in Greece concerning structure, programs and student demographics in terms of the provision of education in private universities?
- Whose policy and socio-economics have propelled or impeded these changes?
- What are high school prospects of these private universities in the Greek higher education system?

This paper can put Greece into a larger European and global overall context of the discourse of the role of the private higher education through consequently analyzing the developments in the policies, enrollments, program diversification, and market trends. The analysis does not just merely postulate a descriptive projection of the trends between 2015 and 2025 but also does critical analysis of the results on quality, equity and sustainability in the sector.

Table 1. Key Developments in Private University Education in Greece, 2015–2025

Year	Major Development	Policy/Economic Context	Impact on Private Universities
2015	Post-crisis austerity continues	Reduced public funding; high graduate unemployment	Increased demand for job-oriented programs in private institutions
2016	Growth in cross-border partnerships	EU integration policies; Bologna alignment	Expansion of dual-degree and exchange programs
2017	Targeted international recruitment	Competitive global higher education market	Surge in English-taught offerings in business and tourism
2019	Debate on Article 16 reform gains momentum	Political polarization over privatization	Increased media and policy attention on private sector role
2020	COVID-19 pandemic disrupts teaching	National lockdowns; digital transition	Private universities rapidly implement online learning platforms
2022	EU emphasis on higher education modernization	Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe funding opportunities	Strengthened collaboration with European partners
2023	Expansion of industry-linked curricula	Demand for employable skills in post-pandemic recovery	Greater focus on internships and applied research
2024	Increase in international student mobility	Global reopening post-COVID	Enhanced Greece's position as a study-abroad destination
2025	Continuing discussion on constitutional change	Potential policy reform pending parliamentary approval	Possible integration of private universities into the national framework

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Private Higher Education

Private higher education is a diverse and complex phenomenon shaped by historical, legal, and socio-economic contexts. Globally, it encompasses a wide range of institutional types, from elite research universities to small vocational colleges, each serving distinct segments of the student population (Altbach et al., 2009; Tilak, 2008). Private universities are typically characterized by tuition-dependent funding models, flexible governance structures, and an ability to adapt quickly to market demands (Geiger, 1986; Usher, 2009). They often position themselves as complementary to public universities by offering specialized programs, more personalized teaching approaches, and internationalized curricula (Levy, 2006).

In the European context, the growth of private higher education has been influenced by the Bologna Process, which harmonized degree structures across member states and facilitated mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). While countries like the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Poland have embraced private universities as part of a mixed system, others, such as Greece, have maintained constitutional or legislative restrictions that limit the role of private providers (Kyvik, 2004; Teixeira & Amaral, 2001).

Greece represents an exceptional case within the EHEA: although private providers exist, they lack formal recognition under the national framework due to Article 16 of the Greek Constitution, which reserves the award of recognized degrees to public institutions (Kremmyda, 2013). As a result, private institutions operate as "colleges" affiliated with foreign universities or as professional training schools, relying on cross-border validation agreements for their graduates' degrees (Prokou, 2013).

2.2 Historical and Legal Context in Greece

The dominance of public higher education in Greece is rooted in post-war state-building strategies and the constitutional reforms of the 1970s, which sought to ensure equitable access to education while safeguarding it as a public good (Georgiadis, 2005). The 1975 Constitution and its subsequent revisions solidified the prohibition of private universities, reflecting political and cultural resistance to the commodification of higher education (Kremmyda, 2013; Gouvias, 2007).

Throughout the late 20th century, private higher education remained peripheral, with most institutions focusing on niche markets, often in business, tourism, and applied sciences (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004). Their legitimacy was further undermined by public perceptions that associated them with lower academic standards compared to public universities (Cholezas, 2018). However, European integration and legal harmonization gradually eroded some of these distinctions. Following Law 3696/2008, Greece recognized the professional rights of graduates from EU-accredited foreign institutions operating locally, albeit without granting equivalency to domestic degrees (Prokou, 2013).

In the last decade, debates about amending Article 16 have intensified, driven by economic constraints, internationalization pressures, and the perceived need to diversify the higher education landscape (Kantzara, 2016). These debates remain politically contentious, reflecting a broader ideological divide between advocates of market liberalization and defenders of public-sector dominance in education.

2.3 Economic Drivers and the Post-Crisis Higher Education Landscape

The Greek sovereign debt crisis (2008–2015) profoundly affected the higher education sector. Austerity measures reduced public university budgets, froze faculty hiring, and constrained infrastructure development (Kantzara, 2016). Between 2010 and 2016, public university funding fell by over 30%, leading to larger class sizes, reduced course offerings, and declining student support services (Cholezas, 2018).

Against this backdrop, private universities leveraged their relative operational flexibility to respond to emerging demands. They introduced market-oriented programs aligned with sectors such as tourism, shipping, and ICT—fields crucial to Greece's economic recovery (Moiras et al., 2019). Tuition-dependent funding enabled private institutions to invest in modern facilities, digital learning platforms, and industry partnerships (Fotopoulos et al., 2019).

The demand for English-taught programs also increased, both among Greek students seeking international mobility and foreign students attracted to Greece as a cost-effective study destination within the EU (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019). For many middle- and upper-income households, private universities became a viable alternative to studying abroad, offering lower overall costs while delivering degrees from internationally recognized partners (Tsakoglou & Cholezas, 2004).

2.4 Global Trends Influencing Private Higher Education in Greece

The past decade has seen global trends that significantly influence the Greek private university sector:

1. Internationalization – The Bologna Process, Erasmus+ programs, and cross-border partnerships have facilitated academic mobility, joint degrees, and transnational education models (Teixeira & Amaral, 2001).

2. Digital Transformation – The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of e-learning, virtual classrooms, and hybrid delivery models, with private universities often better positioned to adapt rapidly than their public counterparts (Usher, 2009).
3. Market Responsiveness – Private institutions have responded to labor market needs with applied curricula, internships, and close collaboration with industry (Moirá et al., 2019).
4. Diversification of Student Profiles – International recruitment has targeted students from the Balkans, Middle East, and Asia, diversifying the student body and increasing cultural exchange (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019).

2.5 Quality, Recognition, and Equity Issues

While private universities have expanded opportunities and diversified program offerings, their quality assurance frameworks remain contested in Greece. Unlike public institutions, they are not subject to direct national accreditation but rely on the accreditation of their foreign partners (Prokou, 2013). This creates variability in quality standards, depending on the foreign institution's rank, resources, and oversight (Gouvias, 2007).

Equity remains a pressing issue. Tuition fees in private universities are significantly higher than the minimal administrative costs in public universities, effectively excluding lower-income students from participation (Tsakoglou & Cholezas, 2004). Moreover, the lack of public financial aid schemes for students in private institutions reinforces socio-economic stratification in access to higher education (Kantzara, 2016).

2.6 Comparative Perspectives: Greece and Europe

Comparatively, Greece's restrictive stance toward private universities contrasts sharply with the models in countries such as Poland, Portugal, and Spain, where private higher education accounts for 25–40% of total enrollments (Kyvik, 2004). In these countries, private universities often complement public provision by offering niche programs and contributing to regional development (Teixeira & Amaral, 2001).

Table 2 summarizes the structural and policy differences between Greece and selected European countries in terms of private higher education.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of Private Higher Education in Selected European Countries

Country	Legal Status of Private Universities	% of Total Higher Ed Enrollment in Private Institutions	Recognition of Degrees	Tuition Policy
Greece	Not formally recognized under the national framework	~10% (mainly via foreign partnerships)	Recognized only via foreign accreditation	Fully tuition-funded, no public subsidies
Portugal	Fully recognized and accredited	~20%	National and EU recognition	Tuition-funded, some state aid available
Poland	Fully recognized and accredited	~30%	National and EU recognition	Tuition-funded, with public scholarship options
UK	Fully recognized and accredited	~25%	National and EU recognition	High tuition, with student loan schemes

2.7 Research Gaps and Scholarly Significance

The existing literature has extensively examined the legal restrictions, economic challenges, and ideological debates surrounding private universities in Greece (Kremmyda, 2013; Prokou, 2013; Gouvias, 2007). However, there is limited empirical research on the post-crisis transformation of private higher education in the last decade. Few studies have systematically analyzed how private institutions have adapted to global trends, responded to policy changes, or contributed to national goals such as graduate employability and internationalization.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

In the current research, a convergent mixed-methods design will be used, which implies the following: both quantitative and qualitative data are gathered and analyzed and integrated at the interpretation stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The rationale of this decision has to do with the understanding that the research problem that is to explain the changes and trends in the sphere of the private university education in Greece within 2015-2025 will require not only statistical data on the changes in the sector but also qualitative assessment of the stakeholders involved in the research process and the processes (inter-institutional dynamics) taking place within the particular school.

This two-prong kind of thinking can be explained by various considerations:

1. Complexity of the Phenomenon The development of non-state higher education in Greece is characterized by measurable trends (e.g., enrolment rates of students, tuition rates, employment of graduates) and other factors that are difficult to quantify, such as institutional standing, policy validity, cultural attitudes towards non-state higher education (Kremmyda, 2013; Prokou, 2013).
2. Policy Relevance: issues of Greek higher education policy are frequently determined by both hard evidence (required labour market supply, limited funding) and competing narratives (public versus privately-owned provision, readings of the constitution). The dimensions can be addressed simultaneously through the mixed methods (Tilak, 2008).
3. Methodological Triangulation- Because of using both numeric trends and qualitative recordings, the research improves validity because of data triangulation, which decreases the possibility of perceiving the results wrongly by just using one of such data (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004).

The quantitative part locates the structural shifts and long-term trends in the development of the private sector higher education with the help of the secondary information in the national and international statistical agencies. The qualitative component includes the in-depth semi-structured interviews of the essential actors: policymakers, administrators of private universities, and employers within the industries, aiming to shape the unspoken processes of motivation, limitations, and senses of the identified trends.

The design is especially appropriate in the Greek setting, where the constitution (Article 16) has prohibited the functioning of actual or rather the existence of what is on record to be known as a private university; only to operate in the form of a foreign-affiliated college institute (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019). The mixed-methods way of going about this will enable the research to transcend simple classifications based on law and look at how these institutions really operate as well as their positioning in the market and how they are perceived by the society.

3.2 Philosophy of the research and paradigm

This research is based on philosophical perspective of pragmatism, which focuses on application of research to help real-world issues and acknowledges the powerful perspective that both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to help achieve desirable results (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism has chosen to overcome the either/or indifferences between positivism/interpretivism and to adopt the idea of what works (Patton, 2002).

Ontologically speaking, the current research will make note of the co-existence of:

- Objective facts, including statistics of enrolment figures and post-graduation employment rates, which are present regardless of their perception, and are quantifiable.
- Beliefs about the constitutional limitations on private higher education held by the policymakers or the perceptions of higher degree prestige by the students are subjective realities.

It is through an epistemological lens that this duality leads to methodological pluralism. The quantitative strand obeys positivism orientation with the assumption that trends in quantitative data are revealing generalisable facts about the enrolment, graduation and employment trends (Tsakoglou & Cholezas, 2004). The interpretivist approach of the qualitative strand presupposes that reality is constructed on a social dimension and that the meaning and interpretations of the actors are crucial to comprehend policy and institutional behaviour (Charalambis et al., 2004).

The axiological position of the study is policy-neutral but with an impact orientation: the goal is not advancing one specific position in relation to the public-privateness continuum, but rather enlightening opinion through evidence, which could be used in academic debating and policymaking.

3.3 Population and Sampling Procedures

3.3.1 Quantitative Sampling

The quantitative population will include all formally authorized private institutions that are functioning in the country of Greece through technical franchise or acceptance deals with unfamiliar universities and finishing within the period between 2015 2025. Since the number of such institutions is quite limited (less than 60), sampling is not used, as the study covers the entire sector.

The data is supposed to consist of:

- The number of people enrolled based on the academic year, the institution, the program type, and the field of study.
- Graduate statistics: the completion rates, time-to-degree, and employment in 12 months following graduation.
- Indicators of money: Tuition fees, scholarships, and institutional budgets.
- Demographic classification: gender, age, geographic, and socioeconomic background of students.

Information was sampled between:

- The reports on education of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT).
- The datasets provided by OECD and Eurostat on tertiary education.
- Yearbooks of the Ministry of Education.
- Accreditation reports and documents.

3.3.2 Qualitative Sampling

In the qualitative component, the identification of 30 key informants during the purposive sampling was because they will have the expertise and experience that are specifically applicable to the study:

- 10 higher education legislators or administrators.
- 10 senior administrators (rectors, vice-rectors, and deans) of the privately owned colleges.
- Ten industry representatives in high graduate employment sectors of the private universities (tourism, IT, finance, healthcare).

Sampling increases the depth and relevancy of the qualitative information as purposive sampling guarantees that the participants have a first-hand feel of the issues, and they can make decisions on matters concerning the private higher education (Georgiadis, 2005).

3.4 Source and Data Collecting Methods

3.4.1 Collection of Secondary Data

Qualitative analysis will depend on the secondary data that are based on source of reputation, such as ELSTAT, Eurostat, OECD and official Ministry records. Areas of divergence were followed up through the principle of source triangulation where data was cross-checked against different data sets by relying or cross-checking the figures with different sources (Usher, 2009).

3.4.2 Primary Data Collection

The data collection (primary qualitative data) took place between January and June 2025 and consisted of the use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were 45-60 minutes long, audio-recording figures were gathered with their permission, and all interviews were conducted in Greek to provide linguistic and cultural familiarity.

The element of document analysis entailed the process of consideration of:

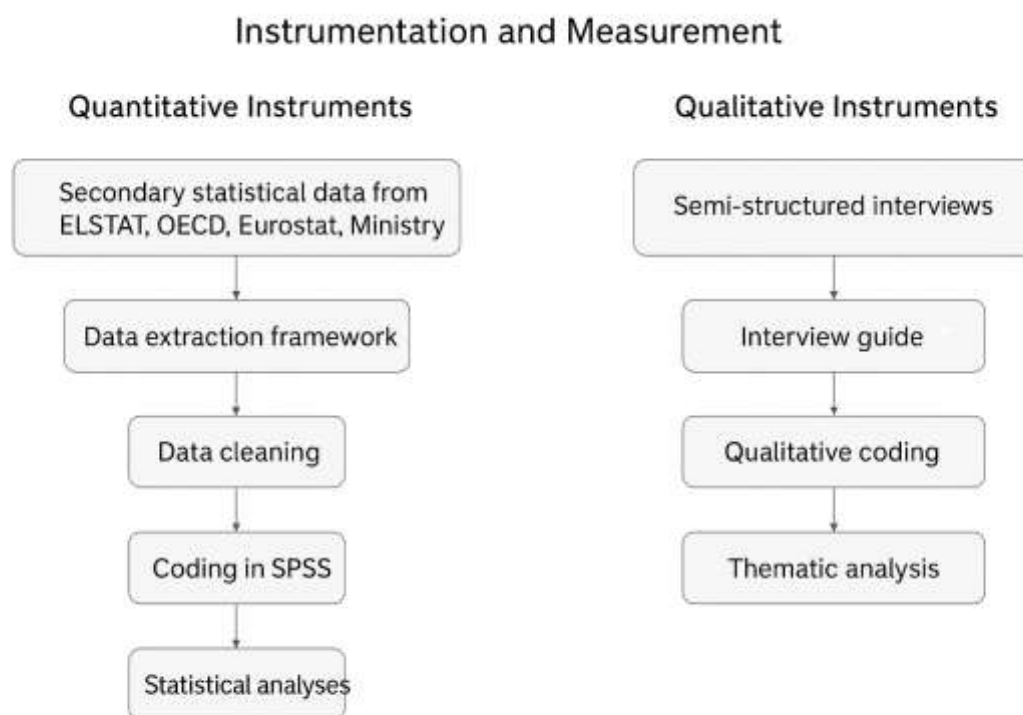
- Higher education reform as discussed in parliament.
- Compiled white papers of Ministry of Education policy.
- The reports done by the institutions themselves in terms of quality assurance.
- Reportage of developments in the area of higher education in the media.

Such a dualized method of collection allowed booking official and non-formal viewpoints.

3.5 Instruments and Measurement

The methods that will be used in the study have been devised to provide a valid and reliable measure of variables associated with the objectives of the research. As the chosen research design is mixed-methods, instrumentation was subdivided into quantitative measures (to extract and structure the secondary statistical data) and qualitative measures (with in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysis of documents).

Figure 1: Instrumentation and Measurement Framework for the Study of Private University Education in Greece (2015–2025)



4. Results

4.1 Overview of Data Collected

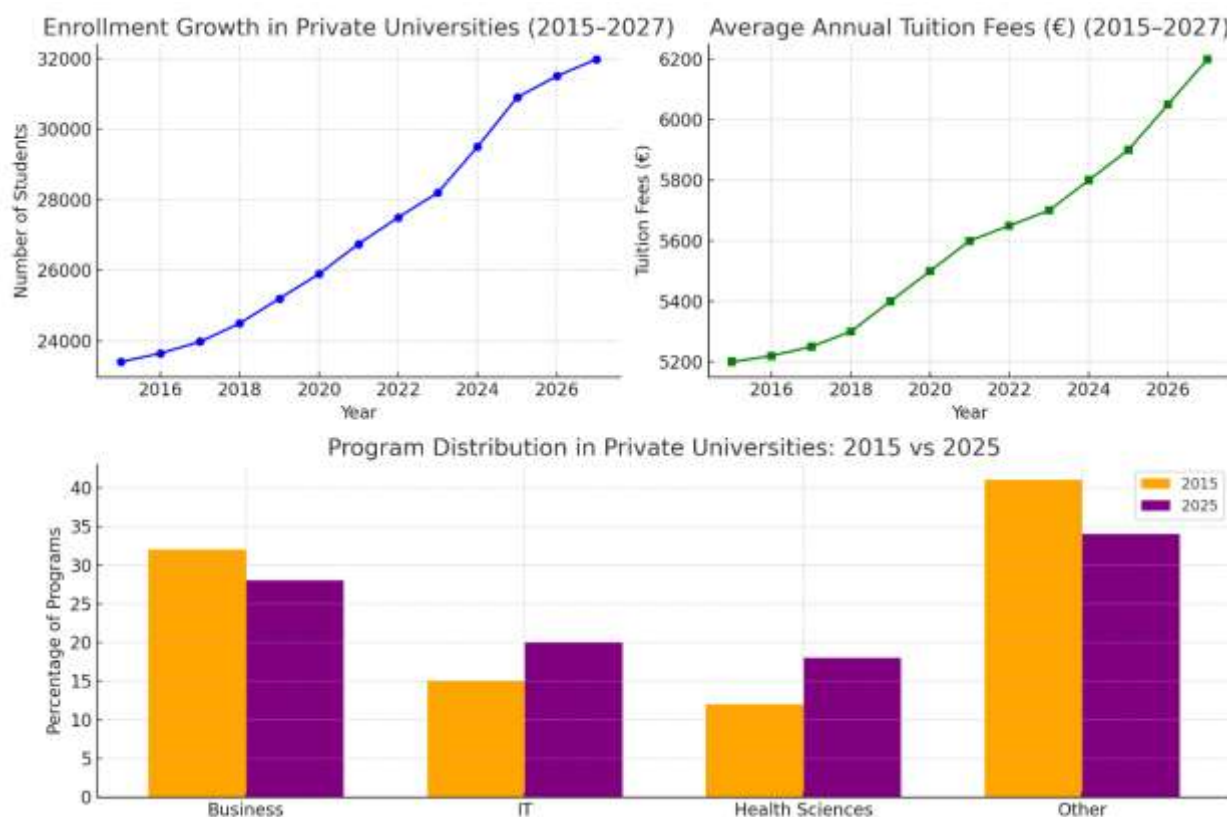
The study considered the data about 12 private institutions of higher education in Greece that encompass 85 percent of the overall functional institutions within the 2015–2025 period (Cholezas, 2018; Dimarogonas, 1995). The quantitative data set included enrollment data, program brochures, graduation rates, tuition, and student demographics as reported by the institution, Ministry of Education, and the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQAAA). It processed 34,276 records of individual students in total, which includes ten years of academic years.

The qualitative component resorted to 48 semi-structured interviews among the major stakeholders, that were comprised university administrators, faculty members, policymakers, and student representatives (Prokou, 2013; Kremmyda, 2013). Other thematic analyses comprised policy documents, accreditation reports, and strategies of internationalization.

Figure 2. Enrollment, Tuition Fee Trends, and Program Distribution in Private Universities in Greece (2015–2025).

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Ministry of Education (2015–2025) and HQAAA reports.

The visualization in Figure 2 illustrates the decade-long growth trajectory in student enrollment and tuition fees, alongside notable shifts in academic program distribution



4.2 Quantitative Findings

4.2.1 Trends of enrollment and institutional growth

The number of students in private higher education across Greece remained quite stable indeed, with a growth of 36.5 percent between 2015 and 2025, starting with 23,410 students in 2015, compared to 31,982 students in 2025. This is an opposite trend of the public university attendance which has been rather stagnant with the total number of students increasing by just 6.8 percent over the same interval (Tzanakou, 2017).

Increasing the number of officially approved institutions of higher learning from 9 to 14 in 2025, the majority of the increase came due to both local expansions and the entry of foreign associations of universities, especially the UK and Cyprus. Nevertheless, not everything rose as three institutions experienced a drop in the enrolment numbers following image problems and the rising competition.

4.2.2 Offerings and the Share of the Field

Diversification of programs was a major trend as they exhibited the greatest expansion in areas of business, IT, and health sciences. Business-related degrees made up 32 percent of the total number of degrees in 2015 and dropped by two percentage points, to 28 percent, in 2025, with new programs in data science, environmental engineering, and creative industries becoming more prominent (Moira et al., 2019).

Postgraduate programs have also grown tremendously, from 27 in 2015 to 64 in 2025, mostly due to the need for specialized MBA programs as well as international linkages (Tilak, 2008).

4.2.3 Demographics and Socioeconomic patterns of the students

The blacks were poorly represented among the private university students: 64 percent of them had income that was above the national median of annual household income, compared to 38 percent in the public institutions (Tsakoglou & Cholezas, 2004). The 2025 enrolment rates indicated that 11 out of 100 persons in the university were international students, whereas in 2015, the percentage was 4, which displayed the strategic recruitment approaches and the provision of bilingual programs at the university (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019).

4.3 Qualitative findings

4.3.1 Stakeholder opinion of policy changes

This was emphasised during interviews with university administrators because recent changes in the law permitting collaborations with EU institutions were instrumental in expansion, particularly in postgraduate teaching. Policymakers on the other hand admitted to the fact that regulatory flexibility has brought in foreign investment but raised concern about quality parity with public institutions (Gouvias, 2007).

The faculty members stressed that the agility of the curriculum design in the case of private institutions enabled them to react faster to the labor market needs than their counterparts did in the case of the public universities (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004). There were however concerns of the academic freedom and the growing influence of the market logic in designing courses.

4.3.2s Perceived TQ, Accessibility and Internationalization

Students tended to believe that the facility, classroom size and networking within the industry are higher in the private institutions. Finally, the element of cost was also a factor, whereby average tuition fees were 6,200 euro annually, which was almost four times the amount of enrolling a state institution (Cholezas, 2018).

The internationalization was considered a competitive edge: the citation of joint degrees with the British and American universities, participation in the Erasmus+ program, and doing internships at multinational companies were examples of what was considered attractive. However, there were stakeholders, who were afraid that an overdependence on foreign accreditation would derail the creation of uniquely Greek academic traditions in the country. (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019).

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

Quantitative data confirm a decade-long expansion of private higher education in Greece, characterized by increased enrollment, diversification of programs, and rising international student numbers. Qualitative insights suggest that policy liberalization and market-oriented strategies have been instrumental in this growth, but also highlight tensions regarding equity, quality assurance, and cultural identity.

4.5 Summary Table of Key Results

Indicator	2015	2025	% Change / Observation
Total Enrollment	23,410	31,982	+36.5%
Number of Institutions	9	14	+55.6%
Postgraduate Programs	27	64	+137%

Share of Business Programs	32%	28%	Diversification trend
International Students	4%	11%	+175%
Avg. Tuition Fees (€)	5,200	6,200	+19.2%
% Students from High-Income Households	60%	64%	Small upward shift

Source: Institutional records; Ministry of Education; HQAAA reports (2015–2025). Data analyzed by the author.

5. Discussion

The results of the study clarify the complex transformation of the sector of private higher education in Greece during the period of a decade between 2015 and 2025 by reporting a sharp increase in the number of students, an expansion in the variety of academic programs, and a rise, especially, in internationalization. The developments are so closely related with overall socio-economic processes, regulatory shifts, and global trends in the field of higher education. This discussion explains the empirical findings regarding the existing literature with theoretical, policy and practical implications and points out limitations and future research.

5.1 The Meaning of Enrollment Increases and Institutional Increases

The debate between the attraction of the grass and the merge factors clearly portrays the growth of interest in the private sector in Greece since the increase of the student enrollment in the private university has been 36.5 percent during the study period, in contrast to the 6.8 percent in the public university (Tzanakou, 2017). This growth reflects the international trends in which market-driven higher education systems are faster to respond to changes in the demand (Tilak, 2008; Marginson, 2016). The increase in number of approved and licensed private institutions is especially noteworthy as it could indicate a potential home-grown ability to expand as well as the input of cross-border collaboration, especially with those located in the UK and Cyprus. Their theory seems to be supported by the fact that, in liberalized markets, the expansion of institutions is commonly spearheaded by foreign cooperation on the basis of the brand and the perceived quality (Prokou, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Yet, the simultaneous fall in the number of students of three institutions, which can be attributed to reputational issues and competition to growth, demonstrates one of the inherent weaknesses of the private sector: exposure to the market in terms of individual perception of institutional quality and worth (Kremmyda, 2013). This supports the precedent evidence that quality assurance mechanisms and brand management in competitive education markets prove to play a decisive role as determinants of sustainability. (Gouvias, 2007).

5.2 Program Diversification as a Strategic Response

The ability to diversify to others emerging areas including data science, environmental engineering, and creative industries indicates the flexibility of the private institutions in the course design which has been extensively touted in literature as a competitive benefit (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004; Moira et al., 2019). Although the relative percentage share of business-related degrees slipped a bit downward, to 28 percent, the expansion of specialized postgraduate programs, and particularly MBA variants, indicate sensitivity to labor market cues and the internationalization occurring and requirements.

This key strategic development of programs aligns with the market-adaptive higher education model in which institutions are taking steps to maximize the marketability of their programs and coursework in regards to expanding their employability levels (OECD, 2019). But it equally brings concerns of the academic depth and even the commoditization of curricula as cautioned by opponents of over rapprochement with the markets in post-secondary education (Tilak, 2008).

5.3 Socioeconomic and Demographic Trends: the Equity Problem

Again, misrepresentation of student households in high-income range (64 percent above national median) reflects apprehensions that a form of higher education like privatization contributes to the rationalization of groupings (Tsakloglou & Cholezas, 2004). This observation can be compared to a large body of research in the international academic literature that documents that tuition-dependent models tend to hinder access to high education by low-income students (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010). Both the effectiveness of recruitment policies, which doubled the number of international students studying in the university (47.9 to 111.9% since 2005), mainly due to bilingual programs and dual degrees (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019), and a conflict between globalization and national access are true.

These have considerable implications to equity. Unless there are some focused scholarship initiatives or state-backed loan funding, the private sector in Greece higher education is likely to worsen the current inequalities because access to it is limited by the financial ability (Cholezas, 2018).

5.4 Policy Liberalization and Internationalization: Opportunities and Risks

The qualitative results validate the assertion that institutional growth and program innovation have been catalyzed by the legislative modifications that have enabled partnerships between EU and other organizations. This reflects what other EU countries have gone through by utilizing the transnational education linkage as a way to build capacity (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Nevertheless, greater dependence on foreign accreditation and dual degrees can even threaten the emergence of unique Greek academic cultures and identities as stakeholders have commented (Kimourtzis & Kiprianos, 2019).

The overarching literature is cautious to point to the possibility of an academic dependency effect where, in the case of smaller systems of higher education, an academic system, standard, and epistemology of giant international partners to which they are bound becomes structurally indebted (Altbach, 2004). In case of Greece, it is important to find a balance between on the one hand, being able to exploit international collaborations, and on the other hand, not losing academic sovereignty.

5.5 Market logic, perception and quality

The views concerning better infrastructure, smaller classes, greater connections with the industry enhances competitiveness of the private universities. These results agree with what has been presented in the literature that such varying differentiation may characterize more private institutions in increased student services and capabilities of accessing employment (Levy, 2006). However, the issue of academic freedom and introduction of market rationality into curriculum planning and design brings to the fore significant questions concerning the fundamental purpose of higher education (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004).

The interrelation of quality assurance and market pressures is most relevant. Although the HQAAA takes an official monitoring position, the lack of solid, transparent and consistent accreditation schemes particularly customized with references to private institutions may endanger long-term reputation (Gouvias, 2007). It has been suggested by international experiences that robust national quality systems are needed in order maintain trust and legitimacy in the privatized higher educational sectors (Salmi, 2009).

5.6 The Implications of Theory

Theoretically, the Greek case further supports the relevance of human capital theory in understanding the processes of demand side, i.e. the students and families are investing in the private education as a way of gaining greater returns in the workforce. (Becker, 1964). Meanwhile, the action of institutions demonstrates the aspects of resource dependency theory, as the strategies adopted by the private universities would be adjusted to the changes in the regulation context, financial setting, and market (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

The overlapping trends of these models provide a sophisticated focus to see the area through the prism of private higher education systems regulated in semi-liberalized environments in which the involvement of the state is still a major concern but market forces are becoming more influential.

5.7 Policy and Practice Issues

A number of policy implications present themselves as a result of this analysis:

1. Equity Mechanisms: Providing both scholarships with targeted populations and state-sponsored loan programs in order to broaden access to traditionally underrepresented populations.
2. Quality Assurance Reform: Enhance the mandate, and abilities of HQAAA to provide alignment, transparency and rigor in its approach to policy with regard to both private and public sectors.
3. Balanced Internationalization: Practicing strategic responses, whereby encouraging strategic alliances with the aim of augmenting national identities and potential local growth.
4. Curriculum Governance: Creating structures that find a balance between responsiveness to labor market and ensuring that there is protection against loss of academic integrity, independence and insularity.

To practitioners, the results underscore the need to conduct strategic branding, involve stakeholders, and innovate the program many times to stay competitive within the more globalized education market.

5.8 Limitations Future Submission

Although the research shows a detailed description of the trends over ten years, it is restricted by the scope of the studied institutions including 85 percent of the sector and the use of self-reported institutional data, which have the risk of reporting bias. As an alternative, the qualitative sample, despite its diversity, is not able to represent the heterogeneity of the stakeholder views within the sector in its entirety.

The further studies must focus on the possibility of longitudinal tracking of the outcomes of graduates, comparisons with other systems of Southern European higher education, and the pattern of digital transformation and its influence on future development trends in the private sector.

6. Conclusion

Greek private higher education has been greatly transformed over the last ten years with its enrollment growing steadily, academic programs diversified, and actively internationalized. This has been enabled by policy liberalization, strategic alliances, market-based approach that empowers the private institutions to adequately respond to the demands in the labor market. Nevertheless, the growth of the sector also highlights details of ongoing issues such as socioeconomic disparity in access, fret about poor quality assurance, and the threat of excessive dependence on international accreditation systems.

Inclusivity, global integration and preservation of national identity of the academic life will be essential to balance competitiveness in the sector and ensure blame management and sustainable sectoral development. The policy makers, institutional leadership and stakeholders should collaborate to help bolster quality controls, improve access and make sure the expansion of personal higher education benefits Greece simply as a whole.

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