

## Greek Lower Secondary School Dropouts: Results from a National Study

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*Quantitative and qualitative data are used to compare the recent drop-out rates in Greek secondary education with the situation ten years previously, and to examine the factors contributing to this drop-out. The authors suggest that the principle reasons for drop-out lie in low school achievement coupled with economic or domestic demands within the family. Unlike many Western European countries, little association was found between dropping-out of school and anti-social behaviour.*

Recent statistical data indicate that more than 15% of Europe's population is economically and socially marginalized. The corresponding rate for young people is much higher<sup>1</sup>. Marginalization and social exclusion, which follows closely, are both attributed to unemployment<sup>2</sup>. Those who are excluded from participation in the labour market are at the same time excluded from other forms of social participation, because employment, in addition to providing the means for a living, constitutes the main vehicle to social integration.

In most (if not all) developed countries of the European Union, unemployment is highly correlated to the education level. It has been found that a high education level maximizes employability<sup>3</sup>, because it decides future training opportunities and the quality level of these opportunities as well.

The direct correlation between unemployment and education level has been documented in the developed countries mainly over the last two decades, in which time profound economic and technological changes have caused dramatic shifts in the global labour market. Enterprises, in their struggle to maintain a competitive edge in the rapidly changing global markets, make broader use of flexible employment structures. Moreover, they seek highly qualified employees, who are able to adjust quickly and are eager to improve their performance throughout their working life<sup>4</sup>.

Presently, the participation of unskilled and semi-skilled workers has decreased in developed countries from 40% to 25%. On the other hand participation of higher education graduates has risen from 10% to

20%. The trend is expected to continue in this direction<sup>5</sup>. According to forecasts, the demand for unskilled workers will be reduced dramatically in the near future<sup>6</sup>.

The reflection of these developments on school dropout employment will be critical, because while compulsory education graduates always have access to vocational education and training opportunities, there is very little provision for the dropouts. Dropout rates in the European Union are far from being insignificant. On average, they approach the 10% level. In addition, 20% of the young people in the age group of 16-24 years have never received a vocational education or vocational training qualification after finishing compulsory schooling. About 20 million school-age young people in the European Union lack minimum education credentials<sup>7</sup>. The impact of this statistic is manifested in the White Paper for Education and Training, in which the confrontation of social exclusion of young people takes first priority and becomes one of the EU's most important goals<sup>8</sup>.

In this paper we present the results of a national survey on the dropout rate in the Greek lower secondary school, which together with the six-year primary school constitute the compulsory education cycle. In doing so we start with a review of the socio-educational context, next we describe the research method, and continue with the presentation of the quantitative and qualitative results, and some discussion.

### The socio-educational context

In Greece, twenty years have passed since the institutionalization of the 9-year compulsory general education (6 years in primary school followed by 3 years in Gymnasium). During this time the dropout rate in the Gymnasium (lower secondary school) has been steadily decreasing. Nevertheless, a large number of young people either don't appear in the A grade of the Gymnasium, following graduation from primary education, or they enroll but drop out some time

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before completing their Gymnasium studies.

The education system provides no alternatives to returning dropouts, since the Gymnasium-leaving certificate is the minimum prerequisite for enrolling in formal vocational training courses. On the other hand, for those who manage to get a job, attending and completing a training course is the only means to certify their competences.

The disadvantages for Greek dropouts seem to have become greater than ever before, because they are called upon to compete for a job in a labour market which is being greatly influenced by the impact of post-industrial developments (i.e. greater implementation of new technologies, globalization of economies, re-structuring of corporations etc.). This, of course, seems to be the case in all EU countries<sup>9</sup>. In this perspective the dropouts, being less qualified, are expected to be a mismatch in the new setting.

Employment is on the decline in the traditionally strong sectors of the Greek economy, i.e. agriculture, manufacturing and construction, where the least educated and untrained labour is found. On the other hand, there is an expansion of employment opportunities in the services sector (tourism, communications, transport, insurance, health etc.) for holders of tertiary education degrees<sup>10</sup>. Another noticeable development is that in Greece many low-status jobs are gradually taken on by foreign workers (mainly Albanians), who, living illegally in the country, accept less than minimum wages<sup>11</sup> and compete with the Greek unskilled labour.

Until recently, those without the Gymnasium leaving certificate have had some chance of being employed, either in small family enterprises (i.e. restaurants, grocery stores, farms etc.) and as craftsman's assistants (i.e. plumbers, electricians etc.) or in unskilled jobs. This is the main reason why this category of young people does not appear to have the worst unemployment record. Actually, statistics show that they have a relatively low unemployment rate, when compared to those who hold a lyceum (upper secondary education) leaving certificate<sup>12</sup>, and an unemployment rate which is 0.8 of the highly educated people<sup>13</sup>. However, a reversing trend is anticipated in the foreseeable future<sup>14</sup>.

The growing need to rationalize the Greek economy is gearing it towards remarkable changes, which in turn are expected to affect the structure of the labour market drastically. It is argued that in the years to come the undereducated and unqualified youngsters, even if they do manage to get some temporary job, will face the danger of unemployment and subsequent social marginalization.

## Survey on gymnasium dropouts

### The method

In view of the context which was just described, the Greek Organization for Vocational Education and Training, commissioned a research team from the Pedagogical Institute to carry out a national survey focusing on the training needs of lower secondary education dropouts<sup>15</sup>. This survey commenced in 1994 and was conducted in two phases.

In the first phase a census was carried out (from May through September 1994) to establish the Gymnasium dropout rate. The method used was the "cohort dropout approach". With this method, which uses school administration files to record the progress of an entering cohort through to graduation or non-completion, it is possible to compare the number of students who enroll in the Gymnasium in a particular year with the number of graduates three years later. In this survey, data for three cohort batches were collected from all 1641 Greek Gymnasia (pupils enrolled in Gymnasium for the school years 1987/88, 1989/90, 1991/92).

In the second phase, structured interviews were carried out with dropouts to examine the factors influencing their decision to terminate their schooling prematurely. From December 1994 through June 1995, ninety interviewers asked a nationwide representative sample of 1450 dropouts (aged 15 to 17, from the cohort 1991/92) a variety of questions concerning school attendance, educational attainment, and work involvement during the school terms and after dropping out, their occupational aspirations and plans, and their training needs.

### The first phase: the gymnasium dropout rate

Gymnasium dropout rates show an overall decline from 12.6% (cohort 1987/88) to 9.6% (cohort 1991/92)<sup>16</sup> (Table 1). This decrease is more striking when the dropout rates are compared with corresponding findings of a survey (using the same method) carried out in the early eighties<sup>17</sup>. It is clear from this comparison that in the last decade the Gymnasium dropout rate has decreased significantly almost by half (Table 2). This finding may be ascribed to:

- the improved accessibility of educational and occupational information by individuals, even in remote areas of the country
- the raising of the education level of the Greek population in the last decade
- the increase in the average economic level of the Greek family<sup>18</sup>.

Cohort Enrollment Date	Enrolled		Graduated		Did Not Complete	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1987/88	140,690	100	122,956	87.40	17,731	12.60
1989/90	139,261	100	123,175	88.45	16,086	11.55
1991/92	140,658	100	127,157	90.40	13,501	9.60

Table 1: Gymnasium dropout data

Half the school leavers do not even show in the Gymnasium A grade (European 7th grade)<sup>19</sup>, while the rest drop out either in the A grade (the majority) or in the B grade (European 8th grade) as well. In the C grade (European 9th grade) the dropout rate is negligible (Figure 1).

The dropout rate of males is higher than that of females [males: 11%; females: 8% (cohort 1991/92)].

Cohort enrollment date	Dropout rate (%)
1980/81	19.50*
1981/82	22.70*
1982/83	17.60*
•	•
•	•
1987/88	12.60
1989/90	11.55
1991/92	9.60

\* Data based on Drettaki (1993)

Table 2: Longitudinal data on gymnasium dropout rate

Differences were pronounced among the regional districts, among the prefectures and among the Gymnasia. The rates were much higher in Thrace and in the Islands (Figure 2). In the former case the high rates are mainly to be found in rural areas and are attributed mainly to pupils of the muslim minority. In the latter case (Aegean islands, Ionian islands, Crete) dropping out of school is mainly linked with early entrance into the tourism labour market. The broader metropolitan area (Athens) had the lowest rates. On the other hand, this area, due to its large population size, has the greatest number of dropouts (absolute frequency).

The dropout rate in rural areas (population less than 2000) proved to be higher than that of urban areas (population greater than 10,000). Only insignificant differences have been found between rural and semi-rural areas (population between 2000 and 10,000) (Figure 3).

In the early 90's, the overall dropout rate in the 9-year compulsory education cycle (Primary school and Gymnasium) is estimated to be about 12%. This calculation takes into consideration the Gymnasium dropout rate of the three surveyed cohorts, as well as relative statistical data from the Ministry of Education for Primary schools<sup>20</sup>. If one accepts this rate (12%) as the average over the last decade, it can be estimated that more than 170,000 young people, aged 12-21 years, have not finished the 9-year compulsory education cycle.

#### The second phase: qualitative results

The findings derived from the interviews show the following<sup>21</sup>:

The gymnasium-leavers come mainly from families of a very low socio-economic and educational level. In addition they also face problems due to sickness, divorced parents, one or both parents deceased, etc.

About half of the youngsters were working at the same time they were attending school. Half of them were occupied in small family enterprises, the other half were helping at home.

The most important reason for leaving school, was learning difficulties, mainly in Mathematics, Foreign Languages and Physics. Seven youngsters out of the ten who showed up at grade A, had to repeat a grade one or more times before dropping out.

About half of the dropouts have regretted not finishing the Gymnasium. And this is because most of them have become aware of the usefulness and necessity of the leaving certificate in the world of work. They have realized that without both relevant

FIG. 1: Dropout rates by school grade

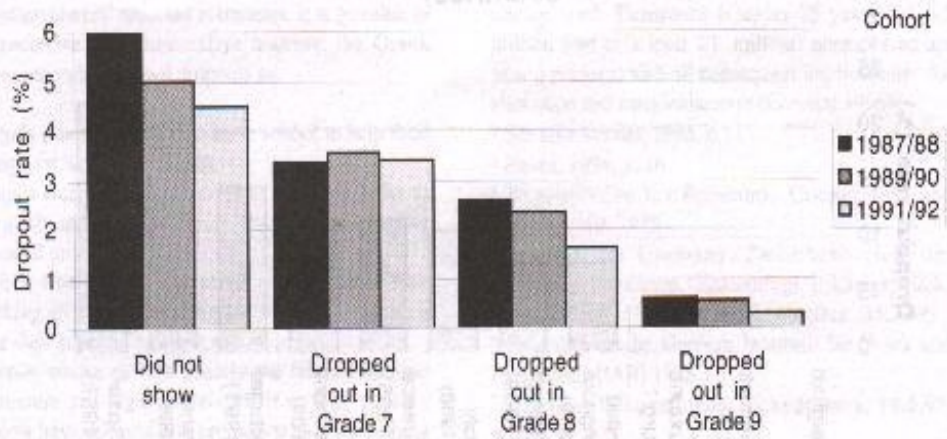


FIG. 2: Dropout rates by geographical region

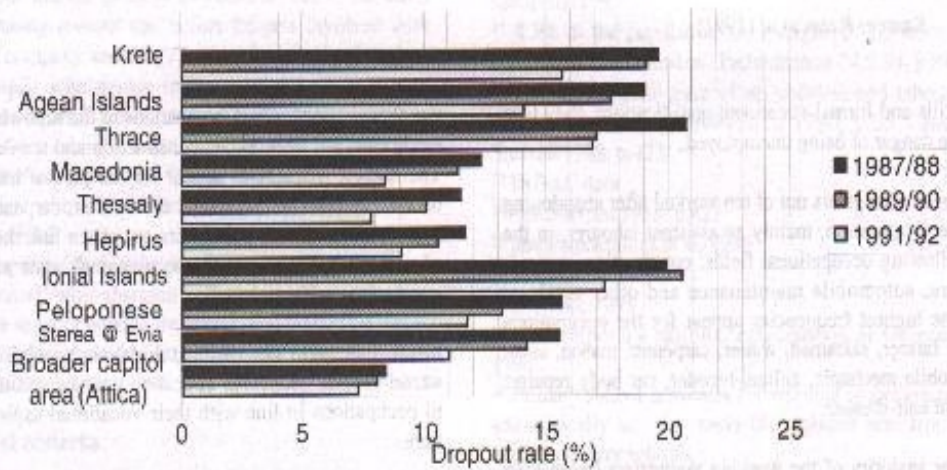


FIG. 3: Dropout rates by population density

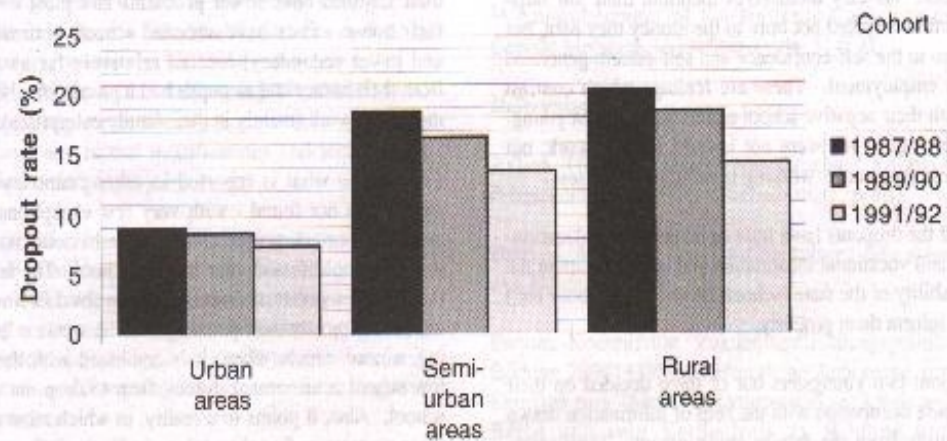
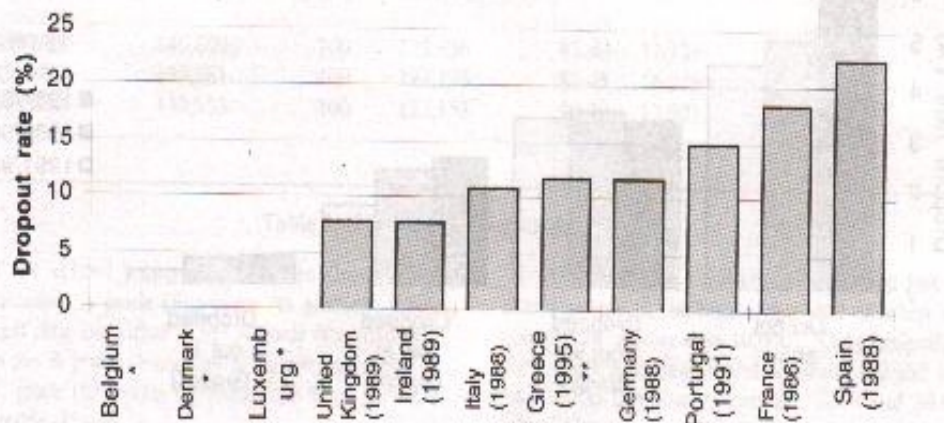


FIG. 4: Dropout rates in compulsory education (EU countries)



\* No data available \*\* See Paleokrassas et al (1996). In the original figure no data was given for Greece

Source: Room et al (1991)

skills and formal vocational qualifications, they face the danger of being unemployed.

Seven youngsters out of ten worked after abandoning the Gymnasium, mainly as assistant-labourer, in the following occupational fields: construction, agriculture, automobile maintenance and other services. The highest frequencies appear for the occupations of farmer, salesman, waiter, carpenter, mason, automobile mechanic, animal-breeder, car body repairer and hair-dresser.

The majority of the working youngsters (more than six out of ten) have permanent employment and appear to have reached occupational stability. About half of them declare that they are satisfied with their work. As they themselves mention, their job satisfaction is linked not only to the money they earn, but also to the self-confidence and self-esteem generated by employment. These are feelings which contrast with their negative school experiences. Eight youngsters out of ten were not insured in their work, but these are mainly working in family-enterprises.

All the dropouts have little or no access to educational and vocational information and complain about the inability of the state (school, Ministry of Labour etc.) to inform them properly.

About two youngsters out of three decided on their future occupation with the help of information drawn mainly from the family environment. Their voca-

tional aspirations aim at occupations in the following categories: art, automotive, construction and textiles. The highest frequencies appear for the jobs of hair-dresser, automobile-mechanic, dressmaker, carpenter and plumber. Seven youngsters out of ten link their vocational aspirations to the occupational state and status of the self-employed.

More than eight out of the ten dropouts wish to attend special vocational education courses specific to occupations in line with their vocational aspirations.

The youngsters in rural areas, in contrast to those in urban areas, have less educated parents, many of whom are farmers and animal-breeders. However, their families have fewer problems and most own their house. They have attended schools (primary and lower secondary) located relatively far away from their homes and as pupils had a greater involvement with work (mainly in their family enterprises).

Contrary to what is reported in other countries<sup>22</sup>, Greece has not found - with very few exceptions - cases of youngsters with anti-social behaviour, both during school life and after leaving school. The fact that a large number of dropouts are involved in work underlines mostly their pressing need to secure a living, a need which, when it is combined with their low school achievement, forces them to drop out of school. Also, it points to a reality, in which most of these youngsters find themselves under the influence

of a strong socializing force (that of work).

Using the findings derived from the interviews, and the interviewers' reported comments, it is possible to characterise, in a summative manner, the Greek lower secondary school dropouts as:

- Pupils (mainly boys) who leave school to help their parents (at work or at home).
- Pupils (mainly boys) who leave school in order to get a job and help the family to overcome pressing financial problems.
- Girls, who usually stay at home and replace their working mother in keeping the house and looking after their younger brothers and sisters.
- Pupils whose parents (mainly the father), because of austere and rigid morals, believe that 'today's schools have decayed and prepare pupils for nothing else but delinquency'. According to these long-held perceptions 'the position of the daughter is in the home and she must marry early before she goes astray'. The son, on the other hand, 'must enter the labour market as early as possible, before he starts *banning around* and before he gets involved with bad company and drugs'.
- Pupils who decide to leave school on their own (often against their parents' wishes), because they consider school a waste of time and because they want to earn their own living.
- Girls who are married and already have had their first child.
- Pupils with family problems (orphans, divorced parents), who abandon school either because they wish to work outside the house or at home (the girls), or because their family problem has influenced their attitude towards school.

### Final remarks

The average dropout rate in the Greek compulsory education cycle is near the average rate in the European Union (Figure 4)<sup>21</sup>. Yet, when linking this seemingly good statistic to the serious demographic problem of Greece, there is an unpleasant reality. In a country where the birthrate-index has fallen to 1.48, with the critical limit being 2<sup>22</sup>, about 15,000 young people exit the education system each year without any formal qualifications and with limited prospects for proper jobs.

On the other hand, it is encouraging that most Greek Gymnasium dropouts hold some sort of a job and do not exhibit antisocial behaviour. More importantly, most of them are aware of their limited occupational prospects and are eager to attend special vocational education and training courses in order to improve themselves.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to available statistics, one out of three unemployed Europeans is under 25 years old. 6.5 million (out of a total 20 million) unemployed are young persons, with all consequent implications for alienation and marginalization (Eurostat 1996).

<sup>2</sup> See also Michel, 1995, p.11

<sup>3</sup> Hasan, 1994, p. 16

<sup>4</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1975

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. for Germany: Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission "Zukunftige Bildungspolitik-Bildung 2000" 1989, p. 129 (H.Schreiber 15.2.89)

<sup>6</sup> Research of the German Institute for Work and Professions (IAB) 1988

<sup>7</sup> Baltas in *Oikonomikos Tachydromos*, 18.5.95, p.101

<sup>8</sup> "White Paper" for Education and Training, 1995, p.19

<sup>9</sup> Rifkin, 1995, pp. 359-368

<sup>10</sup> Kanellopoulos 1994, Katsanevas 1995 and Lampsias 1995

<sup>11</sup> 4.5% of the population are foreigners. Linardos-Rylmon in *Oikonomikos Tachydromos* 24.2.94, p.84

<sup>12</sup> This is a typical case of an undeveloped labour market. See Papatheodosiou 1990, p.25 and Stavrou 1988, p.423

<sup>13</sup> IRDAC data

<sup>14</sup> See Stavrou 1988, p.427

<sup>15</sup> See Paleocrassas et al, 1996

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 15

<sup>17</sup> Drettaki, 1993

<sup>18</sup> Contemporary national calculations of Greece, 1994

<sup>19</sup> Primary school graduates are enrolled in gymnasia automatically on the basis of registers sent from nearby primary schools

<sup>20</sup> Statistical Yearbook of Greece 1990-91, p. 158

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 15

<sup>22</sup> NACRO, 1995, pp. 66-74

<sup>23</sup> Room, 1991, p. 20

<sup>24</sup> Announcement of the Hellenic Company of Genetic Medicine, in *Eleftherotypia*, 31.5.92

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