SEESOX DIASPORA

Student migration from Greece to the UK:
Understanding aspirations, decision-making and future plans

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October 2018

seesox
South East European Studies at Oxford

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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SEESOX Diaspora Working Paper Series No. 2

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Abstract

This paper examines taught postgraduate students' migration from Greece to the United Kingdom in times of economic recession in Greece. For many years the United Kingdom has attracted thousands of Greek tertiary-level students. However, despite the great volume and numerical importance of their migration flows, there is a gap in the study of the educational migration of this national group of students. Drawing on an ongoing doctoral study and based on a series of interviews with taught postgraduate students from Greece, staff members in UK Higher Education Institutions, as well as with education agents, this project investigates various aspects of this phenomenon. Specifically, it explores the patterns and trends of taught postgraduate students' migration from Greece to the UK and examines their aspirations, decision-making, perceptions, motivations, experiences, and graduation plans through the socio-economic, family, social, and cultural contexts in which they are situated. The study found that students migrate for various reasons, such as socio-economic, career-related, socio-cultural, and personal motivations, and student migration is mostly perceived and used as the first stage of a broader emigration project, as almost all of the participants intend to remain abroad upon graduation.

Keywords: student migration; taught postgraduate students; aspirations; decision-making; future plans.

Introduction

According to the study on youth transitions in Europe by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound, 2014, p. 12), young people's transition from education to the labour market has become 'much less predictable' and more complicated since the outbreak of the financial crisis. Even if they have completed tertiary education, they are likely to be unemployed or move often 'in' and 'out' of the labour market, doing part-time or temporary low-paid jobs (Eurofound, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013, 2016). Greece has been one of the countries worst affected by the 2008 global financial crisis and young people are among the groups which have suffered the most (see also Tsekeris, Pinguli, & Georga, 2015). Over the last decade, Greece has exhibited one of the highest overall and youth unemployment rates of the European Union's (EU) twenty-eight member states, as well as one of the lowest employment rates of young people (aged 20-34) who 'have recently graduated from either upper-secondary or tertiary levels of education' (Statistical Office of the European Union

[Eurostat], 2018a, 2018b; Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2018a, 2018b). Under these socio-economic conditions, every year thousands of young people, especially the highly educated, move abroad in search of better employment opportunities and a better future (Labrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2016; Mavrodi & Moutselos, 2017; Pratsinakis, Hatziprokopiou, Grammatikas, & Labrianidis, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2014; Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2014).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018a), in 2017, 37,484 tertiary-level students from Greece studied abroad. In 2015, the total number of outbound students stood at 37,092 and their top destination country was the United Kingdom (UK) with 10,110 Higher Education enrolments, followed by Bulgaria (3,180), Cyprus (2,992), Italy (2,984), Germany (2,822), France (2,194), and the United States of America (USA) (2,072) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018a, 2018b). However, it should be acknowledged that Greek student migration is not a new phenomenon but a continuation of an older trend (ADMIT, 2001). Thousands of Greek tertiary-level students studied abroad in the years preceding the crisis, and the UK has always been their most popular study destination (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2017, 2018a; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Table 1. Higher Education (HE) student enrolments at all UK Higher Education providers 1998/99 to 2016/17 (students domiciled in Greece/all levels of study)

Academic year	Higher Education (HE) student enrolments
1998/1999	28,605
1999/2000	29,580
2000/2001	31,150
2001/2002	28,585
2002/2003	26,005
2003/2004	22,825
2004/2005	19,685
2005/2006	17,675
2006/2007	16,050
2007/2008	12,625
2008/2009	12,035
2009/2010	11,785
2010/2011	11,630
2011/2012	11,790
2012/2013	10,890
2013/2014	10,670
2014/2015	10,130
2015/2016	9,790
2016/2017	10,045

Note. Data from Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; HESA Student Record 2014/15, 2015/16).

As shown in table 1, a significant drop has been recorded in the number of Higher Education students' enrolments over that past decade, compared to the years preceding the crisis. However, despite the significant decline that has been recorded over the years, the

number of students who migrate from Greece to the UK in order to pursue a Higher Education degree every year is still very high. According to HESA data (2017, 2018a), Greece was ranked fourth from 2011/12 to 2013/14 and fifth from 2014/15 to 2016/17 in the list of the top ten European Union countries (excluding the UK) as far as the number of Higher Education student enrolments at all UK Higher Education providers is concerned.

Although the UK has always been by far the most attractive study destination for Greek tertiary-level students, some other study destinations seem to have been increasing in popularity, especially over the last decade, such as the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, Sweden, and the USA (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018a, 2018c). Pratsinakis et al. (2017) highlighted the increase of student migration flows from Greece to the Netherlands over recent years, pointing out that a quarter of annual arrivals in the country comprise of students, and that Greeks are among the largest national groups of students studying in the Netherlands. Specifically, in the academic year 2017/18, 2,634 students from Greece were enrolled at Dutch Universities, and Greece was ranked sixth in the list of the top countries of origin by nationality for Higher Education international students enrolments (Huberts & Vlek de Coningh, 2018, pp. 11-12). The majority of those students (1,912) pursued a Master's course (The Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education [Nuffic], 2018). Apart from their good reputation and the availability of a large number of study programs which are taught in English, Dutch universities seem to have become increasingly attractive due to the relatively low tuition fees, especially after the rise of the cost of university tuition in the UK (Pratsinakis et al., 2017). As the key informants have also pointed out, the rise of university tuition fees in the UK seems to have played a significant role in the rising attractiveness of the Netherlands as a study destination, as well for the other countries mentioned above.

The rise of the tuition fees in UK Universities, in combination with the economic crisis in Greece, may also explain to some degree the gradual decrease of the Greek Higher Education students' enrolments at UK Higher Education providers over the last few years. Students may have been choosing to study in other countries where the fees are much lower and where study might be a more affordable option for them. However, HESA data has revealed that an increase has been recorded in the number of Greek HE students' enrolments from the academic year 2014/15 (9,790) to the academic year 2016/17 (10,045) (HESA, 2017, 2018a). This increase might be partly explained by the postgraduate Master's loans which were introduced by the British government in the academic year 2016/17 for UK and EU Master's students (Hubble, Foster, & Bolton, 2018). The key informants also pointed out that the availability of loans has played a crucial role in the increase of Greek (and other EU) students' enrolments at British universities, as a large proportion of students fund their studies through this funding option.

It should be acknowledged that, despite the great volume and numerical importance of Greek student migration flows, there is very limited data available regarding the patterns and trends of the students' flows and their demographic profiles. In the case of the UK, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record (2013/14, 2014/15,

2015/16, 2016/17) the largest groups of Greek tertiary-level students studying at British universities over the past twenty years have been undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students, followed by postgraduate research students. The total number of HE enrolments of students domiciled in Greece who studied at UK Higher Education providers from 2013/14 to 2016/17 stood at 40,635[1] (HESA Student Record 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17). The largest proportion of them pursued a first degree course (46.4%) and a postgraduate taught course (36.6%) (HESA Student Record 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17). The largest numbers of students who pursued a postgraduate taught course have been found to belong to the 21-24 and 25-29 year age groups (HESA Student Record 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17). Business and Administrative studies have always been at the top of the list of the most popular subject areas alongside the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. The fields of Engineering and Technology, Computer Science, and Architecture, Building and Planning have been attracting a large proportion of first degree and taught postgraduate students over the last few years (HESA Student Record 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17). Law, Education, Psychology and Social, Economic and Political studies as well as Creative Arts and Design have also been included among the students' top preferences, something which was also reported by the education agents and the Higher Education staff members interviewed so far (HESA Student Record 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17).

Although Greek student migration is not a new phenomenon, the changes which have occurred in the socio-economic conditions in Greece over the last decade may have changed the dynamics and characteristics of student migration regarding the patterns and trends of their migration flows, as well as the factors which may underpin students' migration and educational decision-making processes, their aspirations, motivations, expectations, and graduation plans. This paper[2] explores all these aspects of this phenomenon, including the drivers of students' educational migration as well as their plans relating to returning to Greece or staying abroad upon graduation. These two issues have been key topics of a public debate triggered in Greece because of the large number of outbound Greek tertiary-level students and the dramatic increase of the emigration flows of tertiary-educated young people in times of crisis.

Literature review

Student migration/mobility is a worldwide phenomenon which, despite its long history and growing importance, has remained understudied in academic research (Findlay, 2011; King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010; King & Raghuram, 2013; Van Mol, 2013). It has started to attract

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1 The data presented has been rounded according to HESA's rounding methodology.
2 This paper is part of the ongoing doctoral study 'Student migration from Greece to the UK: Contexts, decision-making, experiences and plans'. School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK.

more attention in the field of migration studies very recently, and several geographers as well as researchers in other disciplines have played a significant role in its establishment as an important field in migration research which needs to be further examined and analysed (Brooks & Waters, 2009a; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; King, 2002; King, Findlay, Ahrens, & Dunne, 2011; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Waters, 2012).

Student migration/mobility has been theorised in terms of a number of different conceptual frameworks (King et al., 2011). One framework applied for its analysis is based on the model of 'push' and 'pull' factors (Altbach, 1998, p. xix; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). According to this approach, educational migration is driven by a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors which generate students' desire to study abroad rather than in their home country (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, pp. 82-83; McMahon, 1992). Although this model might be useful for the examination of the external factors which may 'push' students away from their home country and 'pull' them to the study destination, mostly in terms of macro-economic conditions, it seems to overlook a number of other factors which may significantly influence students' aspirations and decisions, such as social, cultural, and personal factors (Li & Bray, 2007; Zheng, 2003,cited in Li & Bray, 2007, p. 794; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014).

Migration aspirations and decision-making should be examined by considering not only the macro-economic context, but also the students' surrounding social environments (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Various researchers have revealed the 'socially embedded nature' of student migration/mobility (Brooks & Waters, 2010, p. 146; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Social networks comprising 'strong ties', such as family and friends, and 'weak ties', such as peers and university lecturers/professors, have been identified as strong influences on students' decisions in various ways, such as through offering advice, encouragement and reassurance as well as through sharing their travel experiences and establishing 'cultures of mobility' (Beech, 2015, p. 335). These networks may not only influence students' decisions but also facilitate their mobility (Beech, 2015).

Student migration/mobility and decision-making have also been examined through the lens of Bourdieu's capital theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Findlay et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; Tran, 2016; Waters, 2012; Waters & Brooks, 2010). Students' economic, social, and cultural capital, and their previous travel experiences have been found to play an important role in their aspirations and decision-making, and the accumulation of social, cultural and symbolic capital has also been identified as a significant driver for migration (Findlay et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; Waters, 2009a, 2009b, 2012). Capital theory has also been useful for the examination of the relationship between international student mobility and social class reproduction (Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006, 2012; Waters, 2006, 2009b, 2012). Specifically, various studies have examined how social class inequalities may be reproduced through student mobility (Findlay, et al., 2006; Waters, 2012). Students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds usually seem to possess the financial, cultural and social resources which may facilitate their mobility (Brooks & Waters, 2009a, 2009b). This allows them to use the appropriate strategies for the accumulation of highly valued cultural capital

represented by the acquisition of overseas academic qualifications and socio-cultural and other experiences which are 'subsequently converted into social status and economic capital' (Findlay et al., 2012; Hall, 2011; King et al., 2011, p. 178; Waters, 2009a, 2009b, 2012).

However, apart from socio-economic factors, student migration may also be driven by a series of personal motivating factors (Findlay et al., 2006; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Personal, academic and professional development, employability enhancement and improvement of career opportunities, language acquisition, and other experiential goals such as leisure, travel, pleasure and adventure-seeking motivations, as well as interest in experiencing foreign countries and cultures have been found to significantly influence students' aspirations (Baláž and Williams, 2004; King, 2002; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Findlay et al., 2006; Mason, 2002; Szelényi, 2006; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014; Waters, Brooks, & Pilmott-Wilson, 2011). In addition, migration may be perceived by young people as a means of becoming independent and pursuing their own life courses away from parental influences (Akhurst et al., 2014; Lulle, Moroşanu, & King, 2018).

Evans's (2007, p. 86) concept of 'bounded agency' has contributed towards a better understanding of the influential role of structural factors and surrounding environments in students' decisions (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). This concept approaches individuals as 'actors', but without overlooking the influential role of their surrounding contexts over their aspirations, behaviours and choices (Evans, 2007, pp. 92-93; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Applying this concept to student migration, it might be argued that although students make their own migration decisions, at the same time the macro-economic situation of the sending and receiving country and the contexts in which they are situated as well as a number of other structural factors may influence their decisions, enabling and constraining their agency (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014).

The ongoing doctoral study on which this paper draws aims to explore the factors which may underpin students' migration decision-making as well as their perceptions, aspirations, motivations, expectations, experiences and graduation plans, taking into consideration their surrounding contexts as well as the British Higher Education recruitment policies applied in the context of the internationalisation of the British Higher Education sector. This paper will present and analyse the preliminary findings on students' aspirations, decision-making, and future plans. The notion of 'aspiration' can be defined as 'from dreams and fantasies to concrete ambitions and goals', while it usually indicates 'the achievement of something high or great' and refers to 'present and future perspectives' (Morrison Gutman & Akerman, 2008, pp. 1-2). Understanding students' aspirations is important in order to further understand the drivers of their migration and the factors which may influence their decision-making and future plans.

Methodology

Interviews with students

The preliminary findings presented and analysed in this paper are based on the data collected so far through semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty-two postgraduate students who migrated from Greece to the UK in order to pursue their postgraduate taught courses in the academic year 2017/2018: sixteen students studying in a city in the north of England and six students studying in London. The objective of the selection of these two locations was to examine whether the location of study may play a role in students' aspirations and decision-making as well as in their socio-cultural experiences and graduation plans.

Thirteen female students and nine male students have been interviewed so far (working class=2, middle class=17, upper middle class=3). Most of them belong to the age groups of 21-24 (n=10) and 25-29 years old (n=9), and three of them are aged 30 and over. The majority of the participants are full-time students with only three of them being part-time students (M=1 and F=2). Nine students are following courses in Economics, Business and Administrative studies (F=3, M=6); two in Mathematics and Physical Sciences (F=2); four in Engineering and Transport studies (M=3, F=1); six in Education and Social Sciences (all female); and one in Creative Arts and Design (female).

Some of the participants were recruited through snowball sampling, while others responded to the researcher's invitation e-mail forwarded by a number of Schools' Administration Offices to their postgraduate taught student cohort. It should be noted that the names of the participants quoted in the present paper have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

Selection of taught postgraduate students

Although postgraduate study is an 'increasingly key aspect of the Higher Education landscape', taught postgraduate students remain understudied in academic research (Mellors-Bourne, Hooley, & Marriott, 2014, p. 18). Taught postgraduate students are one of the largest groups of outbound students who tend to migrate from Greece to the UK every year (HESA, 2018b). The aims of the interviews are a) to examine the factors which may motivate them to migrate and engage with postgraduate taught study, b) to explore their decision-making regarding the selection of the study destination, institution and course of study, and c) to examine their perceptions regarding the implications of their postgraduate taught education to their life courses.

Interviews with key informants

In addition to the interviews with students, four individual semi-structured interviews have been conducted so far with four key informants: two education agents based in Greece and two Higher Education staff members. The aims of the interviews with education agents and staff members working in recruitment/international offices at British Higher Education Institutions are to explore the patterns and trends of the students' flows to British universities as well as the British Higher Education recruitment policies and the role which institutional factors may play in students' decision-making.

Preliminary findings

Student migration in times of crisis: seeking a better future abroad

Students' migration aspirations and decision-making were found to be significantly influenced by the socio-economic context in Greece. All of the participants highlighted that the current socio-economic conditions in their home country have played a crucial role in their migration decision-making and almost all of them intend to remain in the UK or further migrate to another country upon graduation.

Most of them had made the decision to migrate abroad for study and/or for work even before completing their undergraduate study in Greece considering the difficulties they might have to face in their transition from education to the labour market. They referred to the lack of job positions in their field, the high unemployment rate of young graduates, low-paid jobs, and the exploitation that young people have been experiencing in the labour market. Nine out of the twenty-two students decided to pursue a postgraduate taught course straight after having completed their undergraduate study while the rest of them started their courses one or more years after graduation. Although many students had already decided that they would migrate abroad for their studies, they wanted to do it a few years after having gained some work experience and saved some money, because their families could not fully support them financially.

Ten participants had worked in positions irrelevant to their studies before they decided to migrate to the UK. Some of them had worked in cafés and bars as waiters or waitresses, and they highlighted that this is a job which many graduate students do in Greece in order to earn a living due to a lack of better employment options. A few had managed to find jobs relevant to their studies, but they were often insecure, short-term, and very low-paid. The experiences they gained by moving often 'in' and 'out' of the labour market and/or being unemployed caused them feelings of disappointment and distress and enhanced their desire to leave and seek a better life abroad.

Alexandra (30, Psychology): The whole situation made me want to leave more. […] I worked two years as a waitress in a café. That's something that all psychology graduates tend to do. […] I was wondering 'what about my studies?' Will four years of study go to waste? So, I wanted to leave and do something relevant to my studies, something that I'd like to do.

Within this socio-economic context, migrating for study purposes was perceived and used by most of the students as a way of overcoming the socio-economic difficulties and uncertainties they might have to face in Greece. The participants highlighted that they did not want to be unemployed or compromise by accepting a temporary low-paid job with no career prospects and irrelevant to what they had studied and love to do. Educational migration to the UK was seen and used by almost all of them as a strategy in order to improve their employment prospects and seek better employment and life opportunities. These findings seem to concur with those of Van Mol and Timmerman (2014) who have analysed the determinants of intra-European credit student mobility and found that in the case of countries where labour market opportunities are limited for young graduates, studying for some period abroad may be perceived by them as a way to enhance their future employability. Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016, pp. 559, 563) analysis of 341 eighteen-year-old Sardinian students' narratives of the future and their 'imagined mobilities' have also revealed that mobility may be perceived by young people as a strategy to overcome difficulties in a particular context and as an " 'entry ticket' to a better life''.

Choosing where and what to study

The UK was identified as the most popular study destination for the participants and most of them applied only for courses in British universities. However, some students had also searched and applied for courses at universities in other countries, such as in the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany. Reasons for this included free tuition for EU students or lower fees for some programmes; the Higher Education systems' reputation; and the availability of postgraduate programmes of their interest taught in English. However, the main reasons for choosing the UK for their studies were the following: the English language; the British Higher Education system's reputation and educational quality; the universities' reputation in their subject area; the availability of courses; the length of study and course entry requirements; social network recommendations/support; socio-economic conditions and educational and/or employment opportunities in the UK; the postgraduate Master's loan and/or other forms of financial aid; personal interest; socio-cultural and other experiential factors.

Professional and career factors were identified as some of the strongest motivating factors in students' decision-making. Almost all of the participants highlighted that it would be impossible for them to find a 'good' job in their field in Greece, the UK or in any other country abroad by acquiring only a local undergraduate degree, due to high competition in their field of employment. They wanted to engage in further study in order to improve their

employment prospects, pointing out that a postgraduate taught degree awarded by a 'prestigious' British university could improve their CV. Graduate employability and career prospects were two of their main selection criteria for choosing the course and institution. Most of the students also sought out postgraduate studies in order to specialise in their area of interest which they often saw as an 'essential requirement' and in some cases as an 'inevitable requirement' for their professional development and improvement of their career prospects.

Personal interest was cited as another influential factor. Some participants always wanted to specialise in their chosen area, while others began to develop an interest during their undergraduate study. In addition, some students decided to engage with a postgraduate taught study in order to follow a different career path, with most of them changing their field from Education to Business and specifically to Management and Marketing. They decided to do so partly because of personal interest but primarily to enhance their employability, by specializing in afield which is in higher demand especially in the British labour market and other countries abroad.

In many cases, the accumulation of social, cultural and symbolic capital was identified as another significant driver of their educational migration, which is in accordance with the findings of other researchers who have examined and analysed the drivers and the motivations and meanings of international student mobility and international Higher Education (Brooks & Waters, 2009a; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2009a, 2009b, 2012). The status attached to an academic qualification awarded by a 'prestigious' British university as well as the very good reputation worldwide and the academic quality of the British Higher Education system were cited by almost all of the participants in the present study as a key motivating factor for studying in the UK.

> Despoina (26, Business): British universities have a very good reputation. A British Higher Education degree has a different value to degrees awarded by universities in other countries. They are very highly valued in the labour market even beyond the UK. I believe it may improve my career prospects a lot!

The students pointed out that they wanted to acquire a degree awarded by a 'prestigious' British university of good reputation within their subject area, as this could enhance their career prospects and facilitate their professional networking. The acquisition of this qualification was perceived especially by many students studying Business and Administrative studies as an 'essential requirement' in order to enhance their employability and acquire a good job in a highly competitive labour market.

Although they asked their social networks for advice and recommendations (see section 'the role of social networks'), university ranking tables were a source of information which almost all of the students also used in order to get informed about the reputation and educational quality of institutions. The International Graduate Insight Group (i-graduate,

2013) research study on the information needs of prospective taught postgraduate students, in which many UK and non-UK student respondents participated, has also found that this is a practice that prospective postgraduate students follow. In the present study, for some students the rankings played an important role in their decision-making, while others reported that although they took them into consideration, their final decision was not based on them as they do not fully trust them or regard them as a reliable source of information. Many of the participants, especially those studying Business and Engineering, who were mostly influenced by career motivating factors, also searched for alumni outcomes by visiting online professional networking sites.

Socio-economic background and decision-making

Students' socio-economic background and financial factors have played a crucial role in their decision-making, something which has also been revealed by a number of studies examining the determinants of student mobility and students' aspirations and decision-making (Findlay et al., 2006; i-graduate, 2013; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Apart from the English language, another main reason most of the participants in the present study had decided to study in the UK was the availability of the postgraduate Master's loan. Only eight out of the twenty-two students are self-funded. The rest of them have received the loan and/or a scholarship offered by either by their university or another provider in the UK or Greece in order to fund their studies. All of the students mentioned that, although the loan is crucial for funding their study, it is not enough to cover all their expenses. Almost all of them are financially dependent on their families in order to cover their living and other expenses and some full-time students are currently working or looking for a part-time job, although they are worried about balancing work and study. All of the part-time students have received the loan for their studies and one of the main reasons they decided to follow a part-time course was the fact that this mode of study might allow them to combine work with study. A few students had also worked for some time in Greece, mostly doing part-time and low-paid jobs, in order to earn some money for their studies as their family could not financially support them, especially after they got hit hard by the crisis.

> Anastasia (25, Education): I am not a member of a middle-class family. I always had in mind that I had to save some money because you never know. […] After the crisis hit our family, we changed apartment. I didn't have my own bedroom. I had to sleep with my sister in the living room. My parents felt very down. […] I had to work to earn and save some money for my studies.

Some students could not access their first choice university, course and location of study due to financial constraints. The location of the institution in terms of living and study costs, quality of living, employment opportunities, lifestyle, infrastructure, and other socio-cultural factors were given serious consideration by students in their decision-making. The national

Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) (Bennett & Turner, 2012), which explored UK and non-UK taught postgraduate students' experiences across the UK, also found that the location of the institution played an important role in students' decision-making. Specifically, this factor was the third most commonly cited reason regarding the students' institutional choice after the 'overall reputation of the institution' and the institution's reputation in the students' subject area (Bennett & Turner, 2012, p. 3). In the present study, most of the Business students studying in London stressed that they chose this location not only for socio-cultural reasons and the university's reputation, but also because studying and living in one of the biggest financial centres in the world might allow them to stay up to date on the labour market conditions, trends and job vacancies; build professional networks; and familiarise themselves with the job application processes followed in a highly competitive labour market. However, for some participants, their economic capital did not allow them to access their first choice university and location of study. For some students studying in the city in the north of England, especially those studying Business, London would have been their first study location choice for all the aforementioned reasons if studying and living costs there were lower. One of the main reasons many of the participants had chosen the university in the north of England for their studies, apart from its good reputation, was the lower fees and living costs compared to other 'prestigious' universities in other cities in the UK, and especially compared to London. One of the education agents also said that London is the most popular study destination for socio-cultural and professional reasons, especially among upper middle-class students.

The role of social networks

A number of conceptual frameworks applied to the analysis of student migration have overlooked the role which family and socio-cultural context may play in students' aspirations and decision-making. However, the preliminary findings of the current project have shown that student migration has a 'socially embedded nature' and students' decision-making is 'strongly embedded within social relationships'. This aspect was also revealed by Brooks and Waters' study (2010, pp. 146,153) on UK students who were studying abroad or who were considering doing so, as well as by Beech's (2015) analysis of data collected through interviews and focus groups with international students from twenty-three different countries studying at three universities in the UK. Van Mol and Timmerman's (2014) research findings on the determinants of intra-European student mobility have also shown that social networks play an important role in students' aspirations and decision-making. Specifically, in the present study, before choosing their study destination, course and institution, most of the participants had asked for advice and recommendations from family members, friends, partners, peers, former university lecturers/professors, education agents and other people they knew who had previously studied or were currently studying in the UK. These people, through their advice, encouragement and sharing of their experiences, were identified by many of the participants as acting as role models, influencing their

migration aspirations, decision-making, and attitudes towards their engagement with postgraduate taught study in the UK. The participants mentioned that by observing the educational and professional steps and life courses of their siblings/friends/partners in the UK, their desire to migrate was enhanced. In this sense, migration was perceived by some participants as a 'normal course of action' with the objective of engaging with postgraduate taught study and seeking a better future abroad (Beech, 2015, p. 347).

Furthermore, social networks, the social and cultural capital, and the experiences that students had acquired by travelling abroad significantly motivated and facilitated their migration. Many students had visited their family members/friends/partners while they were studying and/or working in the UK. Their travel experiences had strengthened their desire to migrate there because they felt familiar with the study destination at a social, cultural, and academic level. These findings are similar to those reported by Brooks and Waters (2009a), Beech (2015) and Van Mol and Timmerman (2014) regarding the determinants of student mobility and the influential role of social networks in mobile students' aspirations and decision-making.

Institutional factors and networks such as university education representatives, student recruitment agents, and the British Council were cited by very few participants as a source of information they had used as part of their decision-making. These networks were not identified to have played an important influential role apart from in the case of three students who had used the consultancy services provided by an education agent. The majority of the students were highly influenced by their social networks along with the online research they made in order to become informed about the institutions and courses. Almost all of them had completed the application process by themselves or with the help of family members and/or friends. Economic capital was also found to prevent some students from receiving professional career and academic support and advice in their decision-making and application process, as some participants stressed that they did not want to use the services provided by education agencies due to the high administration fees.

The influence of family, friends and partners

Almost all of the participants said that their families have been positive and supportive about their decision to migrate to the UK for their studies as well as to remain there or further migrate to another country upon graduation. Although they felt worried and sad that they would be away from them, they encouraged them to pursue their dreams as they perceived their migration as a way to 'escape' from the economic crisis and an opportunity for them to seek a better life abroad.

> Aspa (22, Business): They said 'leave to save your life!' but then they were more reluctant thinking 'our two children will be abroad'. […] But I know that given the time period they were very open-minded. […] They were very supportive. They knew that if I stayed there, I would have no job.

A small minority of the students said that one or both parents were not very positive about their migration decision mostly because they were worried about them and did not want them to leave home. Specifically, they pointed out that this is a tendency observed in many Greek families where parents are often overprotective towards their children and do not want them to leave the parental home at an early age. They also highlighted that parents need to support their children to become independent without being afraid of taking risks. However, even in these cases of students where one or both parents were not initially positive about their decision to migrate, they finally supported them as they believed that this would be in their best interests.

> Rafail (25, Engineering): They supported me but you know how families are in Greece. They worry a lot about their children, and they don't want them to leave home and live abroad. Now they are fine.

The friends of most of the participants also supported their decision to leave. Students said that many of their friends and peers were unemployed or had found a low-paid job of no relevance to their educational background. Some of them would also have migrated abroad if they could have afforded it, as emigration is also viewed by them as a way to seek a better life. A number of participants mentioned that some of their friends are going to migrate to the UK for postgraduate study next year and they believe that they have significantly influenced their decision by giving them positive feedback about their own experiences.

Partners have also played a pivotal role in students' aspirations and decision-making. A few students mentioned that a strong driver for their migration was their partner, who was already studying and/or working there or he/she was going to migrate to the UK for study and/or work.

> Anastasia (25, Education): It was a very strong motivating factor the fact that my girlfriend would come here for her studies too. She made me want to study and pass my modules to graduate. She was about to leave, and I had to do something to leave too. […] We wanted to study and live here together.

Furthermore, some students' decision-making with regard to the location of study was also highly influenced by considerations of the preferences and plans of their partner. Specifically, some of them had planned to move there with their partner and an important factor they considered when choosing a study destination was the employment opportunities which would be available there for both of them as they intend to remain in the UK upon graduation.

Leaving the 'family nest' and exploring the world

Migrating for study purposes was perceived and used by many students not only as a response to the difficult socio-economic conditions in their home country, so as a means to search for better employment and life opportunities, but also as a way to explore the world, discover themselves, become independent, take their lives into their own hands, and live away from parental control and their family's 'safety net'. Many participants perceived their migration as an opportunity for 'self-experimentation' and 'self-growth', something which was also reported by Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016) analysis of the 'imagined mobilities' of eighteen-year old Sardinian students. Their analysis of 341 students' narratives of the future showed that many respondents imagined themselves being mobile and their 'imagined mobilities' were perceived not only as an " 'entry-ticket' to a better life" and a strategy to overcome socio-economic difficulties but also as a 'form of self-experimentation' (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016, pp. 559-560).

In addition, in the present study, although many of the participants wanted to leave their parental home earlier, financial constraints did not allow them to do so. Some participants mentioned that, although they could stay in Greece and work for their family business, they did not want to do that. Leaving the parental home is considered as a 'key moment in the life course' and along with the school-to-work transition is often perceived as an one of the two 'first active transitions to adulthood' (Eurofound, 2014, p. 19; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2017, p. 399). The findings of this study have shown that educational migration was perceived by many participants as an opportunity to achieve these two transitions and become independent and autonomous.

> Marios (24, Business): I also wanted to leave to test my limits away from the family's protection. […] If you live alone and have to do some things on your own, you may discover some aspects of yourself you didn't know, and in general this may help you develop personally. […] One of the main reasons I wanted to leave was to get to know myself better, to think out of the box.

Furthermore, almost all of the students said that they had always dreamed of studying and living abroad, not only for professional and educational reasons but also for experiential motivations. Most of them expressed their desire to explore the world, visit many places and experience different cultures, and their migration to the UK was seen as a way to fulfil their aspirations.

> Aris (22, Business): I really like travelling, experiencing different cultures. […] I wanted to leave and get a change of environment [...] to gain more experiences, to expose myself to an international context. I wanted to come to London, which is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. […] I've made friends from different countries and I really like that each one of them

has a story to tell about his country, his culture. My knowledge about the world has increased a lot this way.

A number of studies on intra-EU mobility have also shown that intra-EU migrants often move abroad driven not only by economic and career-related factors but also for socio-cultural and personal reasons, such as motivations of self-exploration and self-development (King, Lulle, Conti,& Mueller, 2016; King, Lulle, Parutis, & Saar, 2018; Lulle et al., 2018). Specifically, London, which has been described as a 'Eurocity' (Favell, 2008, pp. 30-45), has been found to attract many young European graduates, not only due to economic and professional factors but also for reasons related to culture and lifestyle (King et al., 2016; King et al., 2018). Apart from being a global financial centre, London's multicultural and cosmopolitan vibes, social and cultural attractions, and urban lifestyle are some of the reasons why this city has become one of the most attractive destinations for young people (Favell, 2008; King et al., 2016; King et al., 2018; Lulle et al., 2018). Consistent with this literature, the research findings of the present study on students' decision-making regarding the selection of location of study have also revealed that London has been an attractive destination for some students not only for the employment opportunities and career prospects they perceive that this city may provide them with upon graduation, but also because of the socio-cultural factors mentioned above.

Future plans

Regarding students' future plans and their intentions to return or not return to their home country, seventeen out of the twenty two participants reported that their main plan is to remain in the UK upon graduation. Although they are uncertain about how long they will actually stay in the UK, the vast majority of them want to find a job and live there at least over the next few years. They believe that there are more educational and/or professional opportunities there compared to their home country and that gaining some work experience in the UK might also enrich their CV and enhance their employability and career prospects.

Some students mentioned that, although they would like to return to Greece upon graduation mostly for reasons associated with family and friends, lifestyle, and weather conditions, they would rather not do that at least for the next few years. They pointed out that they would return only if they could find a job matching their interests and qualifications, and which might provide them with a good quality of life. However, they highlighted that it is unlikely that this will happen in Greece especially over the next decade, due to the current socio-economic conditions in the country.

> Despoina (26, Business): I would like to find something relevant to my studies, to Marketing, to earn a living. [...] I would like not to struggle in order to get by. [...] For me, quality of life matters a lot. I don't expect to find a very well-

paid job. I never had that goal. I just want to get a regular job which might allow me to earn a living, save some money in case of an emergency, do some things I like to do and, of course, I want to find a job which I really like.

In line with King et al.'s (2018, p. 14) findings on the future plans of young Baltic graduates living in London, the present study has also indicated that for many participants there is significant uncertainty and ambiguity about the future and for a few of them 'stay or return' is not the only available option. Apart from the UK and other European countries, especially in Northern and Central Europe, such as Germany and Sweden, some students also consider other migration trajectories beyond Europe. Specifically, Dubai was identified as a very popular destination for some male students studying Engineering and Business, mostly for economic, employment and career-related reasons. The students pointed out that in their career fields there are many employment opportunities there, very well-paid job positions, and that the work experience they could gain there might also boost their career and professional development. Like some of King et al.'s (2018, p. 14) participants, some students in the present study also perceived their studying and working in the UK as a 'stepping-stone to somewhere else'. Specifically, studying and working for a period of time in London was seen by some of them as a necessary step that they need to take in order to develop professionally, build professional networks, and enhance their knowledge, skills and qualifications, which might also enable them to seek better employment opportunities in another country.

However, for some participants, living and working abroad is not only associated with professional and economic reasons but also with personal and experiential motivations, as has been described and analysed in the previous section. Two participants also mentioned that they would not like to live and work in the same place and/or do the same job their entire life, but that over the coming years they want to try new things and gain more experiences by moving to new places and getting different jobs related to their subject area. Career flexibility was another factor which was cited by students to have significantly influenced their decision to remain in the UK and in general abroad, upon graduation.

Five participants want to engage with further study at postgraduate research level in the UK after the completion of their studies. Two of them mentioned that one of the main reasons they decided to migrate to the UK in order to pursue a postgraduate taught degree was to progress to a higher academic qualification, and specifically to a PhD programme, as they believe that there are more employment and research opportunities there compared to Greece in the field of their interest. However, for all of these individuals, the only way for this plan to become a reality is to receive a scholarship or another form of financial support.

Returning to Greece was seen by the majority of the students as the last option they would choose only in the case that they could not find a job in the UK, or somewhere else abroad for those students who would consider other migration trajectories apart from the UK. Only two participants, two female students, intend to return to Greece upon graduation, mostly for personal and emotional reasons. They mentioned that prior to their arrival in the

UK their plan was to migrate for their studies there and then remain and work for some years upon graduation. However, their plans changed during their course, mostly because of some negative experiences and difficulties they encountered at academic and/or personal and socio-cultural level. One male student also plans to return upon graduation due to family reasons, although his initial plan was to remain in the UK for at least four years in order to pursue a PhD course. However, he leaves open the possibility of returning to the UK in the future.

Although almost all of the students argued that they plan to remain abroad upon graduation, they are uncertain whether they would stay in the UK, return to Greece, or further migrate to another country in the long term. However, some of them pointed out that they could not imagine living abroad permanently, and that they would like to go back to their home country and live there, not in near future but probably after ten years, in order to have a family, be close to their family and friends, and/or some other reasons such as the weather, lifestyle, the language, and their love for their country.

However, before they do that, they want to live and work abroad for some years in order to gain various professional, educational, social and cultural experiences which are also expected to help them develop not only professionally but also at a personal level. Some of them argued that obtaining a British Higher Education qualification and gaining work experience abroad, and especially in the UK, might enhance their employability and career prospects in Greece after they go back. However, for other students, although it is too early to make such long-term plans, living permanently and having a family in the UK or in another country abroad seems to be something they would like to do or could do if they were satisfied at a personal, professional, social, and cultural level and if other factors were favourable for their children and themselves, such as in terms of quality of education, quality of life, lifestyle, social services, professional expectations and career prospects.

Finally, there were some participants who pointed out that they would like to return to their home country and help it to progress as they believe that Greece might benefit from the knowledge, skills, and networks students may acquire by studying and working abroad. However, they said that they would like to do that not in near future but in a few years' time because first they want to develop their knowledge, gain more experiences at a personal, educational, professional and socio-cultural level, and earn and save some money in order to start up their own business later on, given that at the moment the current socio-economic conditions may not allow them to do so.

> Chrysanthi (23, Mathematics): I would like to go back to Greece after I turn 35 or 40, you know. Not now […] because I think that Greece is a beautiful country to have and raise your family. Especially in the place I come from. […] I love my country. However, my plan is to live and work abroad, earn some money and gain some experience and then go back to invest my money and bring new ideas to my country, in my field you know. I don't know yet what I

am going to do. […] I don't know, but when you go abroad for further studying and working, you can bring back new ideas.

Student migration before and after the crisis

As has been outlined at the beginning of this paper, Greek student migration is not a new phenomenon but a continuation of an older one (ADMIT, 2001). However, the way that educational migration is viewed and treated by Greek students during the years of economic crisis seems to have changed compared to the years preceding the crisis, especially in terms of the drivers of their migration and their future plans. One of the main motivations of Greek student migrants in the past seemed to be their failure in the university admission exams in Greece (Panhellenic examinations) (ADMIT, 2001; Eliou, 1988) or their fear of failing, as this failure was usually perceived as being equivalent to social failure due to the importance attached to the acquisition of a Higher Education degree and especially to a degree which could enhance employability in the public sector (Eliou, 1988). Another reason some Greek students tended to migrate for their study in the past, was the fact that no postgraduate programmes and institutions had been established in Greece at that time (Eliou, 1988). Therefore, many of those who wished to obtain a postgraduate degree in order to purse an academic career or get a graduate job used to move abroad to study (Eliou, 1988). The research project ADMIT (2001) which explored student mobility and Higher Education admissions in five EU countries - France, Germany, Greece, Sweden and the United Kingdom - found that educational migration from Greece to the UK, especially in the case of undergraduate students, was mostly motivated by students' failure in the Panhellenic examinations. Accordingly, migration for postgraduate studies in the UK seemed to be related to the fact that postgraduate programmes in Greece were considered to be 'highly competitive', given the limited number of students they accepted (ADMIT, 2001, p. 58). Furthermore, the study found that one of the reasons Greek students decided to pursue a Master's course in the UK was their perception of Master's programmes in the UK being 'more specialized', 'focused', and 'better administered' than some postgraduate programmes offered in Greece (ADMIT, 2001, p. 13). The acquisition of a postgraduate degree was perceived by some students as a way of enhancing their employability and improving their employment prospects and career opportunities leading to further upward social mobility (ADMIT, 2011, p. 13).

In the past, a large number of the students who had migrated abroad for their studies tended to return to Greece upon graduation (Eliou, 1988). However, over the past few years, this tendency seems to have changed as a large proportion of students migrate abroad for their studies with the intention of remaining and working there upon graduation (International Consultants for Education and Fairs [ICEF] monitor, 2012). The present study has shown that student migration within the context of economic recession seems to be perceived and used by the majority of students as the first step in a broader emigration

project. According to the research findings on their future perspectives, almost all of the students migrated to the UK for their study with the intention of remaining there and/or further migrating to another country upon graduation. These findings are in line with those of Pratsinakis et al.'s (2017) study on recent Greek migrants to the Netherlands. Specifically, according to their findings, a proportion of the recent Greek emigrants in the Netherlands comprises former students who had migrated there for their studies and decided to remain upon graduation (Pratsinakis et al., 2017). Some of them are students who were already studying there before 2010 and, although they had not originally planned to seek employment, they finally decided to stay due to the worsening socio-economic conditions in Greece (Pratsinakis et al., 2017). Others are students who have recently migrated there with an emigration plan in mind and their educational migration was treated by them as a first step to implementing it (Pratsinakis et al., 2017). Sakellariou and Koronaiou's (2018) study on young people and recession in Greece also found that, in times of crisis, many young Greeks think about migrating not only for study purposes but also in order to find a job and remain abroad for years.

This change in students' migration aspirations, motivations, and future plans, and the way they view and use their educational migration has also been reported by the key informants. Specifically, one of the education agents highlighted that, in previous years, the most popular question which education agents used to receive from students who were interested in studying in the UK was whether the degree they were going to acquire abroad would be recognised in Greece as equivalent to those awarded by Greek Higher Education Institutions, as they planned to return to Greece upon graduation. However, since the outbreak of the crisis, most of the students no longer express any concerns regarding this issue, as they are mostly concerned about the employment prospects which the qualification obtained in the UK may provide them with in the labour market abroad rather than in their home country, since the vast majority of them intend to remain and work abroad after their studies.

Conclusions

The preliminary findings presented and examined in the present paper have revealed that a variety of factors may impact on students' migration aspirations and decision-making. The surrounding contexts, including the socio-economic conditions in their home country compared to the destination country as well as the family, social and cultural context in which students are situated, along with their personal and experiential motivations, have been found to significantly influence their decisions. These findings correspond with those of Van Mol and Timmerman (2014), who have analysed the determinants of intra-European credit student mobility and found that structural factors and surrounding environments may influence students' mobility decisions.

Social networks and economic capital were identified as two of the most influential factors in students' aspirations and decision-making. Economic capital and structural factors were also found to be crucial factors which may facilitate or constrain students' educational migration. If they had not received the postgraduate Master's loan and/or a scholarship offered by the universities and/or other providers in the UK or Greece the majority of the participants highlighted that they might not have been able to migrate and study in the UK and seek better employment opportunities and a better future abroad.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study have shown that migration was perceived and used by most of the students in two main ways which are similar to the two dimensions of mobility that emerged in Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016) analysis of the eighteen-year old Sardinian students' narratives of the future and their 'imagined mobilities'. Firstly, the majority of the participants in the present study, as well as most of their families and friends, perceived their migration as a response to the difficult socio-economic conditions in Greece, and used it as a way of coping with the difficulties in their home country. Almost all of the students viewed their migration and postgraduate taught education in the UK as a way to improve their employment prospects and seek better employment opportunities and a better future abroad. Secondly, many of them decided to migrate to the UK not only for professional reasons but also for experiential and other personal motivations. For them, their migration could allow them to live alone and discover themselves, and being away from the family's 'safety net' was seen as an important opportunity for 'self-experimentation' and 'self-growth' (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016, p. 563)

In line with Van Mol and Timmerman (2014) and Cuzzocrea and Mandich (2016, p. 563), these preliminary findings have shown that students seem to exercise their agency and 'exercise some form of control' over their future when making and implementing their migration decisions. However, the findings have also revealed that, at the same time, students' aspirations and decisions seem to be influenced by their surrounding contexts and a number of structural factors, which may enable and constrain their agency (see Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014; Evans, 2007).

Furthermore, the findings of the present study have shown that, although it is not a new phenomenon, Greek student migration seems to have acquired a new momentum over the past few years. In the years preceding the crisis, student migration was mostly seen as a career step and many students tended to return to their home country upon graduation (Eliou, 1988). However, student migration currently seems to be perceived and used by many more students as a first step in a broader emigration project, as the vast majority of them plan to remain abroad after the completion of their studies. These changes in students' migration aspirations, decision-making and plans indicate that student migration is not a fixed phenomenon but its characteristics and dynamics are always being informed and influenced by a variety of factors and the contexts within which it takes place.

This study is expected to further examine students' aspirations and decision-making through the carrying out of more interviews with students. Furthermore, its future

exploration of their experiences and graduation plans may allow a more in-depth investigation of their aspirations and future perspectives and of how educational migration may be perceived, used and experienced by young people in times of crisis.

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