

Necessary Reforms in the Greek Academic System: A semi-outsider's perspective

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Why a semi-outsider?

- Grown up in Athens – bilingual German & Greek
- Studied CS at TU Munich & ENS Lyon with internships in Paris, Madrid, and at NTUA (Athens)
- PhD in CS at TU Munich (2004)
- 1st PostDoc at ICS-FORTH (2005 - 2006)
- 2nd PostDoc at EPFL, Lausanne, Switzerland (2006 - 2008)
- Independent Junior Research Group funded by DFG at LMU and then TU Munich (2008 - 2010)
- Permanent Research Group Leader at HITS, Heidelberg (since 2010)
- Full Professor of CS at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (since 2012)
- Mostly living in Crete since the beginning of the pandemic (Feb 2020)
- Affiliated Scientist at IMBB-FORTH (since 2021) – ancient DNA lab

Let's start with a quote

“We are working more and getting less work done”

Quoting two former lab members that went back to Greece after having spent time working in my group at HITS, Heidelberg

This talk is intended to provoke!

Yes, the know-it-all from abroad will be ranting most of the time ... so let me apologize for this right now, but this is also a part of my role.

Structure

- **Appointment committees**
- Professor & Researcher Salaries
- Fringe benefits & pension plans
- Internationalization
- The ancient DNA lab at IMBB
- Hierarchy
- Family Friendliness & Gender balance
- Administration Overhead

APELLA

- System has deficiencies
 - Candidates can submit incomplete applications, e.g., not including copies of PhD certificates etc. - should be checked by administration
 - Might cause issues in selection committees
 - Can be easily fixed in the portal
- Appointment of selection committee members
 - I often received emails stating that “you have been appointed to serve on the appointment committee of XY” without having ever even been asked before
 - Some universities and research institutes are capable of asking beforehand
- Easy fix of technical issues – Apella just needs to be re-programmed appropriately
- Committee members should only be appointed after being asked

Conflict of Interest in Selection Committees

- The conflict-of-interest regulations are very lax in Greece (essentially only relatives excluded) compared to Germany
- For instance, In Germany one typically declares a conflict-of-interest for any former PhD student (even if graduated 20 years ago), any candidate one has published with or has had a grant with in the last 3 years, etc.

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Salaries

“Please say something about our ridiculous salaries” – quote by a colleague in Greece prior to this talk; I had planned to anyway.

- Net salary in Greece, full professor, married, 3 kids approx. 2000 EUR
- Base net salary in Baden-Württemberg, full professor, married, 3 kids approx. 6000 EUR
 - + X where X is a negotiable salary supplement depending on reputation, offers from other places, etc. typical net range between 500-1500 EUR
- Cost of living in Greece compared to Germany: **80%**
- Acceptable net salary in Greece, hence 4800 EUR

Implications of low salaries

- **Zero** competitiveness at European and International Level
- Researchers from the huge Greek Academic diaspora will only return for important personal reasons → hinders brain gain
- Many researchers are “hunting” random grants, not connected to their core research interests to obtain salary supplements and make a living
- Numerous researchers would like to come and work in Greece for a decent salary – 4 ERA chairs in Crete + 3 in the rest of Greece are not surprising; conduct research under good conditions, with good salary (e.g., 80% of German salary) and at low personal risk
- Greece should make use of its location advantage

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Fringe Benefits & Pension Plans

- Fringe benefits such as
 - More free language courses
 - Support for pension plans
 - Support by an international office
- are necessary to attract international talents
- Need to rise awareness about taking care of private pension plans *-part of the problem are the low salaries again-* but even just a monthly savings plan on say, the MSCI-World ETF via an inexpensive NeoBroker is nothing people talk about
- Huge need for action in this area!

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Internationalization

- Greece needs more international researchers to bring in new ideas and concepts (research & management)
- The proportion of Greek nationals at Universities and Research Centers is extremely high compared to other European countries
- **Again:** the salaries
- But also, and this can be easily changed, too strict language requirements for knowing Greek when applying
- There is no reason for this, especially at research centers where no teaching is involved
- Suggestion: Grant foreign researchers/professors a period of 5 years to learn Greek → this has apparently been implemented in Cyprus

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The ancient DNA lab at IMBB-FORTH

- The laboratory is expensive – clean room
- However, there is absolutely no fixed budget for laboratory consumables, some permanent staff, outsourcing DNA sequencing
- Constant struggle to find money for staff and consumables
- This lack of sustainability for an expensive and important infrastructure can simply not be – in a country that is so rich in archaeological samples
- **Consequence:** When archaeologists contact the lab they need to be told that there is no money for sequencing their samples and they collaborate with labs abroad
- The exact same phenomenon can be observed in Biodiversity research – the locals sample stuff in the Biodiversity hotspot (e.g., Greece/Latin America) and the big-shots abroad do the sequencing and get the fame
- Solutions:
 - Fixed, annual budget for the lab for at least 5 years from the state/regional government
 - Change of legislation to forbid export of samples
- The total absence of some fixed yearly base funding is a general problem of all research groups

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Hierarchy

- Hierarchy in the Greek academic system is still much more pronounced and important than in other European countries or the U.S., for instance
- Classic example: **εσείς - εσύ** at professor-undergraduate or professor – PhD student interaction level
- I have trained several of my own PhD students from Greece to stop doing this!
- This leads to conversational asymmetry

“In conversation analysis, asymmetry is an imbalance in the relationship between speaker and hearer(s) as a result of social and institutional factors. Also called conversational asymmetry and language asymmetry.”
- Do we want to encourage asymmetry in the academic discourse?
- Can be changed by increased awareness

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Gender Balance

- To be fair, this is already recognized as an issue in FORTH's Gender Equality Plan, but 9 men and just 2 women on the board of directors is not good
- University of Crete
 - Rectors: 5 – 0
 - Deans: 4 – 1
 - Department Presidents: 11 – 5

Family Friendliness

- More efforts needed, for instance:
 - Specification of home-working regulations that are family-friendly
 - Are all major meetings hybrid?
 - Part-time regulations
 - Fringe benefits for child care
 - Definition of core working/meeting hours
 - Family friendliness committee
 - Information about legal provisions
 - Why schedule an institute retreat on a Saturday → this is a disadvantage for all families
- Actions needed to improve competitiveness

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Administration Overhead

- I am getting the first impression of this, while preparing the grant agreement → additional internal 11 page ethics application needed for DNA sequencing of non-endangered species (2%) that has already passed the EU ethics check
- Needs to be reduced at all cost
- But, there is also a typical management mistake that is being done over and over again everywhere (also at HITS in Heidelberg)
- When forms and processes are complex, management needs to provide a rationale as to why this is the case such that employees better understand the need for it

Conclusion

- I acknowledge that a lot of progress has been made, but more work is required to turn Greece into an attractive country for conducting research ...
- The far too low salaries and the lack of fixed base funding are the major challenge
- Everything else can be fixed, but will have little effect without a substantial salary increase, establishment of unconditional base funding, and roll-out of fringe benefits
- Greece as a place to live has tremendous advantages – so let's explore them