

The Impact of a Greek Governmental Initiative Towards Lifelong e-Learning

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Abstract

Nowadays, several national and international policies are happening to promote lifelong learning practices. These policies can lead to quantifiable outcomes such as employability, human resource development, and digital literacy. Greece is trying to create the foundations for fostering sustainable and viable lifelong learning initiatives. Thus, during the last years, there is a continuous increase of public and private investments in lifelong learning in Greece. The aim of this paper is to illustrate one of the key actions of the Greek Ministry of Education towards the increase of lifelong e-learning opportunities in Greece as well as the future plans which will be correlated to the European directives. The ultimate goal is to highlight what has been achieved so far and which direction to help improve the quality, attractiveness and accessibility of the opportunities for lifelong learning in Greece.

Keywords: Training, e-learning, evaluation, budget, viability, reciprocity.

Trends towards the promotion of lifelong learning

The reports from international organizations which were produced during the European Year of lifelong Learning in 1996 (EC 1996; OECD 1996; UNESCO 1996), reflected the global trends upon which lifelong learning and the learning society are postulated. On the one hand, lifelong learning policies can be partly addressed to quantifiable outcomes such as employability, human resource development, technological accreditation and global competition. They can also be addressed to less easy measurable outcomes such as social inclusion, or active citizenship, or even the quality of life itself (Griffin, 1999).

Coombs P. A. & Ahmed M. (1974), have proposed the following general typology related to educational activities:

- Formal education: the enacting hierarchically structured and temporally graded educational system from the first degree education to the third grade education.
- Non – formal education: this category includes every organized educational activity besides formal educational system, individually delivered or as a part of a wider activity that aims to a specific target group and has concrete educational objectives.
- Informal education: life – long process, where each individual accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and values from his daily experience and as an effect of the social environment (family, neighborhood, work, entertainment, social associations, job market, public transport, media etc.).

The term “lifelong learning” has prevailed to refer to all types of education (formal, not-formal and informal), however simultaneously refers also to a philosophical significance, according to which education is considered as a long-lasting process that begins at the birth and lasts for all duration of life (CEDEFOP, 1996). The definition of UNESCO (1976) for lifelong learning, declares lifelong learning as a limitless form aiming at the reformation of the existing educational system. Education and learning are not limited in the school framework. They should extend to the entire life of a person, to include all the dexterities and sectors of knowledge, to use all the possible means and give the chance to all people to achieve a complete growth of their personality. Learning processes, in which children, adolescents and adults of all ages are involved during their life, in whatever form, should be considered as a whole.

The European Commission offers the following definition of lifelong learning:

“All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.” (Europa, 2001)

By the definitions, inquiring efforts and given attention of researchers and international organizations on lifelong learning we assume that lifelong learning is a rapidly developing field, which includes all the systematically organized activities, through which, adults, acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes. Initial and continuing Vocational training, vocational training, apprenticeship, education in working places, the multidimensional education of vulnerable social groups are distinguished as sub – systems of this field. All this means that formal systems of provision need to become much more open and flexible, so that such opportunities can truly be tailored to the needs of the learner, or indeed the potential learner. (Europa, 2001)

The multiplicity of lifelong learning and the variety of offered activities should be attributed in the rapid changes in economic – technological and social - cultural fields of developed and developing societies and in the consequent needs that these changes ignited:

- In the economic - technological level the globalisation of economy and the intensification of economic competition, as well as the developments in the sector of new technologies especially in information technology and communications, created new conditions in the job

market. The need for specialisation and adaptation of new knowledge and skills in the permanently altering business environment, followed by consequent unemployment, led to the emergence of adults' education as basic mean for the promotion of economic growth.

- In the social - cultural level movements of populations and immigration, intensity of phenomenon of social exclusion, the crisis of traditional social structures, demographic aging and the exploitation of free time, led to the growth of other forms of education of adults that are not connected immediately with the job market and the needs of economy.

This new reality, the differentiation of social, economic, cultural and technological conditions and the intensive differentiation of learners' needs, constitute the ultimate cause factors of the adoption of Life – Long e–Learning as an efficient solution and a social and economic strategic choice in national and international level facilitating important economic and human resources.

In the last years, we have been witnessed in Greece a continuous increase of public and private investments in lifelong learning led to the evaluation of related policies, measures and programs using criteria like viability and efficiency. This happened due to the commitment of the Greek government to address the main priorities of the European Commission's action plan for lifelong learning. This it proceeded in promoting initiatives about the development of innovative ICT-based content, services and practice for lifelong learning.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate one of the key relevant actions of the Greek Ministry of Education towards the increase of lifelong e-learning opportunities in Greece as well as the future plans which will be correlated to the European directives. The ultimate goal is to highlight what has been achieved so far and which direction to help improve the quality, attractiveness and accessibility of the opportunities for lifelong learning in Greece.

Lifelong e-learning policy by the Greek government

Lifelong learning, as a state institution in Greece initiated in 1929 when the government of El. Venizelos established the foundation to fight against adults' illiteracy. In 1943 the "Department of Adult Education" was established in the "Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs". In 1983 the "Department of Adult Education" was replaced by the "General Secretariat for Adult Education" that currently operates as a self-governed state service, monitored by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. In 2008, "General Secretariat for Adult Education" was renamed to "General Secretariat for lifelong learning".

As a member country of European Union, Greece has been following the developments in educational policy in lifelong Learning, hesitantly in the beginning and at a faster pace in the last years. This process was time-consuming and required the establishment of a complex of institutions and services. Several Ministries such as the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Greek Manpower Employment Organization (OAED), supervised by Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs, as well as other Ministries (e.g. Ministry of Tourism) provide lifelong learning programs to citizens, workers, and disadvantages people.

As a matter of fact, Greece in order to support the growth of lifelong learning established a necessary legal framework just few years ago. In 2003 the law N. 3191/2003 was voted. With this

law founded the “National System of Connection of the Initial and Continuing Vocational Education with Employment” (ESSEEKA). Among its several objectives, ESSEEKA aims at the configuration of single and unique rules for the evaluation and the certification of vocational education and training (institutions, programs, instructors, infrastructures and equipment).

In 2005 law N. 3369/2005 (OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE HELLENIC REPUBLIC 171, copy A', 06-07-2005) titled “Regularization of lifelong learning and other provisions” came into effect. This law defined lifelong learning and training and enacted the National Committee of lifelong learning aiming at the diagnosis of needs of Life – Long education and training, the evaluation and the co-ordination of related institutions and providers of Life – Long education and training, as well as their interconnection with the “National System of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment” (ESSEEKA). In 2005 ministerial acts were published establishing the “System of Certification of Instructors of Adult Education”, which determines the terms, the criteria and the process of registration of Instructors (EKEPIS).

The public institution that is responsible for lifelong Learning and undertakes actions and measures in this sector, is the General Secretariat for lifelong learning (GGLL) of the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religions. GGLL is the Institution that designs, coordinates and materializes in national level measures and actions that concern lifelong learning like: Initial education of adults, fighting illiteracy and supporting the completion of obligatory education. It is also responsible for the design and delivery of programs of general education and training of adults, continuous training, training and education of vulnerable social groups threatened by social exclusion, learning Greek as second language, and programs on IT. The GGLL supervises the Institute for Continuing Adult Education. It has additionally created Second Chance Schools (SCS). The main aim of SCS is to bring young people back into educational system, so that they can complete their compulsory education. The program lasts for 18 months.

The Prefectural Committees for Adult Education, which are supervised by the Prefectural Authorities and the GGLL, are responsible for the realization of lifelong learning programs at local communities. Courses are provided through the Prefectural Committees of Popular Continuing Education (NELE) and in a number of Open Care Community Centers (KAPIs). The latter are specifically for people who are over 60 years old. The NELEs do not specify age and generally courses are open to all ages. In order to meet the new social setting of learning demands, GGLL offer lifelong learning programs in several areas like literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, science literacy, media literacy, environmental literacy, cultural literacy, etc. The various LL programs offered by GGLL and its supervised institutions had been created with the vision to create open spaces of learning contributing to social cohesion, economic well being and democratic citizenship.

GGLL has made substantial progress in the last five years. It currently runs 58 centers for adult education, 58 schools of second chance (seven of them inside jails), and 54 schools for parents. It caters for a total of 256,000 adult learners, wishing to increase that number. Greek Ministry of Education seems to have taken right measures for achieving the LL goals in 2010, based on the recommendation of the European Union Council, during a meeting in Lisbon in 2000.

Despite the actions that have been taken, Greece is in the lowest rank among member states in the field of the citizens' participation in lifelong learning programs of education and training as far as the age group 24-64 is concerned. Greek participation is only 1.8% while EU average participation is 10.8%.

Table 1. Population in Education and Training between 25-64 years (percentage rates)

	2000		2005	
		Total	Male	Female
EU-25	7.9	10.8	10.0	11.7
Greece	1.1	1.8	1.9	1.7

Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey)

In order to raise the rate of participation, two things are necessary: i) public funding for the creation of more lifelong learning opportunities for adults and ii) provision of high quality and accredited lifelong learning programs.

In Europe there is a considerable fluctuation in the level of public investments in the education and the training as percentage of GNP. In Greece the public expenses constitute the 4,2% of GNP. In most countries public expenditure lies between 4% and 6%, the average being 5.22%. Actually, Greece belongs in the countries with comparatively low levels of expenses for the education and the training. This low level of expenses is justified partly by the budgetary restrictions that limit the possibilities of Greek government in of placing in application the all required policies. Regarding the level of expenses per education-level, Greece falls short of the first degree and secondary education. Also private investments in education in Greece are the 0.22% of GDP. They are even lower than those in certain newly arrived countries in the European Community.

KEEENAP Case Study

Recently, in 2006, GGLL decided to offer life-long e-learning programs free of charge. Thus, it established the Centre for Distance lifelong Education and Training of Adults (KEEENAP.) KEEENAP has been established since distance learning is now also popular, especially given Greece's remote regions and scattered islands. To realize the demand for distance learning programs, it should be stated that the Greek Open University's courses have more than 60,000 applications for 4,000 places (learners are selected by lottery). KEEENAP's lifelong e-learning programs lead to the acquisition of either a 'Certificate of Training' (this is awarded for programs that last for up to 75 hours) or a 'Certificate of lifelong Learning' (awarded for programs that last for up to 250 hours).

KEENAP's lifelong e-learning programs cover three topics:

- Information and Communication Technologies. This program consists of 5 course modules (Information Technology I-V). Its duration is 250 hours (50 hours per course). It is designed for learners who wish to acquire basic and advanced IT skills. The curriculum is relevant to the ones that can lead to an IT qualification like the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), IC3 and the Computer Literacy And information Technology (CLAiT) certificate from the University of Cambridge.
- Economics, Business Management & Administration. Its duration is 250 hours (50 hours per course module). The topics of the 5 course modules include Principles of Economics, Entrepreneurship, Marketing, Business Administration & Management, Accounting, Statistics and the Use of ICTs in Business.
- Train the Trainer. It consists of 5 course modules. Its duration is 250 hours (50 hours per 8 weeks course module). The topics covered include Theory about Adult Education, Mentoring Techniques, and Assessment of lifelong Learners.

Learners after the successful completion of a program can be granted a certificate from the organization signed by the General Secretary of lifelong Learning, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

KEENAP's programs are being delivered via e-learning methods with the use of Moodle Learning Management System. Learners are provided with online learning objects which are audio and video tutorials, especially prepared for self-paced learning. Learners are advised to study for approximately 6 hours per week for each course module (each. A study guide is being offered to each learner for helping them to plan their own time to study the learning material, perform self-assessment tests, and electronically submit one assignment per week. Learners are continuously supported by mentors (one mentor per 30 students).

Learners participate in three (3) non compulsory (but strongly recommended) contact sessions during the 8 weeks course module duration. In some cases there may be more than five contact sessions. During the contact sessions, learners have the opportunity to clear up misunderstandings, improve their understanding of the learning content and strengthen tutor-learner and learner - learner communication and built of trust. Especially for communication purposes, a chat room and an asynchronous discussion forum is being provided. Attention is being made to create a virtual learning community so that learners do not feel isolated.

Course modules require 4 to 6 written assignments which are evaluated by Tutors. Learners also take a final examination at the end of each course module.

In this section we present some evaluation indices for the performance and efficiency of e-learning programs. In particular, we can use and present the index of percentage participation per region, the index of percentage coverage of regional demand, and the index of percentage integration of studies per region. These indices extracted and illustrated in the following context:

Table 2. Indices for the performance and efficiency of KEEENAP lifelong e-learning programs

(1). The index of percentage participation per region	=	Number of applications per region / Number of applications in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)
(2). The index of percentage coverage of regional demand	=	Number of students per region / Number of applications in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) per region.
(3). The index of percentage integration of studies per region	=	100-(Number of students who quittedinterrupted / Number of students in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) per region.

Using the available data-set from General secretariat of life-long-learning, for the three programs that had been offered during the academic period 2007–2008, we can make interesting comments about the performance and efficiency of e-learning programs. The average participation rate per course module programme and regional department corresponds to 31 students.

The number of applications, regarding the programme of Information and Communication Technologies for the academic period 2007, amounted to about 3372. From the total number of 1215 students who enrolled to this program, only a figure of 874 students participated actively and completed the program, whereas a number of 341 students interrupted the program.

The total number of life long-learning programmes, for the academic period 2007-2008, rose to around 96 local - regional branches. The majority of these branches were allocated to the program of Adult Teachers Education, corresponding to 70 local - regional branches, whereas the equivalent figures for both programs of Economics and Business and the program of Information and Communication Technologies corresponded to 13 local - regional branches for each program, respectively.

The total number of students for the life long-learning programmes, for the academic period 2007-2008, corresponds to around 3005 students. The majority of students, approximately 2225 students, were allocated to the program of Adult Teachers Education, whereas the corresponding number for each of the programs of Economics and Business and the program of Information and Communication Technologies corresponded to 390 students, respectively.

Regarding the average number of the students for the life long-learning programmes, for the academic period 2007-2008, students were allocated to approx. 32 persons per local - regional branch for the program of Adult Teachers Education. However, the corresponding average number of students per local - regional branch, for both programs of Economics and Business and the program of Information and Communication Technologies, corresponds to 30 students per local - regional branch for each program, respectively.

For the academic period 2007-2008, the total number of applications to KEEENAP regarding the participation in the program of Adult Teachers Education, accounted to 2658 applications. The majority of the applications in this program was allocated to both the region of Central Macedonia and the region of Attica, accounted for 448 and 335 applications, respectively. The high number allocated to the region of Attica is due to high concentration of population in this specific region and also due to high unemployment rate in this area. Furthermore, the high unemployment rate in the region of Central Macedonia could also justify the large number of applications in this area. Summarizing, due to the above mentioned reasons, the majority of local - regional branches is allocated to the region of Attica, accounting 12 local - regional branches, and the region of Central Macedonia, accounting 11 local - regional branches, respectively. On the other hand, the lower figures of applications correspond to the regions of Ionian Islands, with 92 applications, and the region of South Aegean, with 108 applications, consequently, due to the lower unemployment rate in these areas.

According to the index of regional demand for life long-learning programmes, an approximate figure of 17% corresponds to the region of Central Macedonia and an approximate figure of 3 % corresponds to the region of Attica, whereas, the related figure for the region of Crete accounted to 10 % of applications, respectively.

Moreover, the same analysis holds regarding the regional demand of academic period 2007-2008 for both the life long-learning programs of Economics and Business and for Information and Communication Technologies. For the academic period 2007-2008, the total number of applications for both programmes accounted to 3701 applications. The highest percentages of applications, for both the programs, correspond to the region of Attica and the region of Central Macedonia. On the other hand, the lowest percentages of applications, for both the programs, correspond to the region of Ionian Islands, both for the programs of Economics and Business and Information and Communication Technologies.

The following Table illustrates the number of applications per region for the academic period 2007-2008. The total number of applications was 3944, of which, 2007 applications correspond to the programme of Economics and Business and 1937 applications to the program of Information and Communication Technologies. Concluding the analysis of the number of final applications, the trend of regional allocation of applications is constant, with the regions of Attica and Central Macedonia to concentrate the highest rate of applications, and the region of Ionian Islands to correspond to the lowest rate of applications.

As far as the regional allocation of the initial and the final number of applications for the period 2007-2008 is regarded, the analysis may conclude to some main results. Regarding the initial number of applications for the period 2006-2007, there were a total number of 1006 initial applications at national level, of which 428 applications concern the programme of Economics and Business and 578 concern the applications for the program of Information and Communication Technologies. According to the results illustrated in the following Table, the highest figure of initial applications concerns the regions of Attica and Central Macedonia, while the lowest number of initial applications concerns the region of Ionian Islands and South Aegean, respectively.

Table 3. Final Number of Applications per Region 2007-2008

Region	Economics, and Business Entrepreneurship	Information and Communication Technologies	Total
East Macedonia/Thrace	110	103	213
Attica	547	505	1052
Western Greece	42	40	82
Western Macedonia	135	152	287
Epirus	95	115	210
Thessaly	135	97	232
Central Macedonia	166	170	336
Crete	36	34	70
Peloponnesus	342	328	670
North Aegean	105	110	215
Ionian Islands	85	69	154
South Aegean	100	116	216
Central Greece	109	98	207
Total	2007	1937	3944

The regional allocation of the total number of 166 certified students in the field of Economics and Business accounts for 26 for the region of Attica, 22 for the region of Peloponnesus, 21 for the region of Epirus. The allocation is approximately the same regarding the rest of the regions. The lowest participation regards the region of Crete, which corresponds to only 10 certified students. However, regarding the program of Information and Communication Technologies, from the total number of 172 certified students, only 25 of them were allocated to Attica and 23 to the West Macedonia. The lowest percentage corresponds to the region of East Macedonia and Thrace with only 9 certified students.

Table 4. Initial Number of Applications per Region 2007-2008

Region	Economics, and Business, Entrepreneurship	Information and Communication Technologies	Applications per region/ Total Applications	Applications per region / Applications to ICT program
East Macedonia & Thrace	23	38	5,373831776	6,574394464
Attica	88	110	20,56074766	19,03114187
Western Greece	23	42	5,373831776	7,266435986
Western Macedonia	32	66	7,476635514	11,41868512
Epirus	54	47	12,61682243	8,131487889
Thessaly	32	35	7,476635514	6,055363322
Central Macedonia	77	113	17,99065421	19,55017301
Crete	25	39	5,841121495	6,747404844
Peloponnesu s	42	39	9,813084112	6,747404844
North Aegean	6	13	1,401869159	2,249134948
Ionian Islands	5	9	1,168224299	1,557093426
South Aegean	13	9	3,037383178	1,557093426
Central Greece	8	18	1,869158879	3,114186851
Total	428	578	100	100

The available data appearing in the following graphics show that there is a higher participation rate of women, in particular from the total figure of 338 students in life-long-learning the corresponding number of men was 133 against 205 for the women, respectively. For the program of Information and Communication Technologies the majority of participation rate concerns the men-participation, while in the program of Economics and Business the majority of participation concerns the women participation, respectively. Also, the higher percentage of graduates focused within the region of Attica, maybe due to the high concentration rate of population in this region, Looking at the indexes of demand and efficiency, the results concluded that according to these indexes, the lower values correspond to the regions of Attica and Western Macedonia. For both regions of Attica and Western Macedonia, the analysis of these data show a higher value for demand index for applications and a lower value for the efficiency rate of applications in the program of Economics and Business. Also, for the region of Attica in the program of Information and Communication Technologies, there is a higher value for the demand index for applications and a lower value for the efficiency rate of applications for the region of Western Macedonia.

Regarding the academic period 2008-2009 there is a total number of 4024 applications in KEEENAP, with a total population of 7361535 and for the ages 18-67 years old. In particular, from the total number of 4024 applications, the corresponding number is 966 applications for the region of Attica and 583 applications for the region of Western Macedonia and about 332 applications for the region of Crete, respectively. Finally, for the academic period 2008-2009, the successful application regional index, (that is the rate of the number of regional applications with regard the total regional population-target), shows that the higher value of this index corresponds to the region of Western Macedonia.

These findings make evident that there is a constant increase in the number of applications for the programs of KEEENAP. This is justified partly by the fame they acquire via the experience of the current students and graduates and partly because of the expansion of their objects. Observing Figure 1 where the change in the number of applications for the programs of Economics and Business and Information and Communication Technologies for years 2006-2007, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 is presented, this trend is clear. This is strong evidence that there is a significant demand for lifelong e-learning programs in the Greek educational service market will continue to rise in the future.

As we can see in Figure 2, in both programs the number of the students attended was far less related to the initial applications. From this index we can strengthen the assumption of the high demand for these programs and the existence of a large pool of possible and learners willing to participate in lifelong e-learning programs. The Demand & Efficiency Index of Business and Economics and ICT programs for 2006 – 2007 were indicative of the magnitude of the demand for attendance.

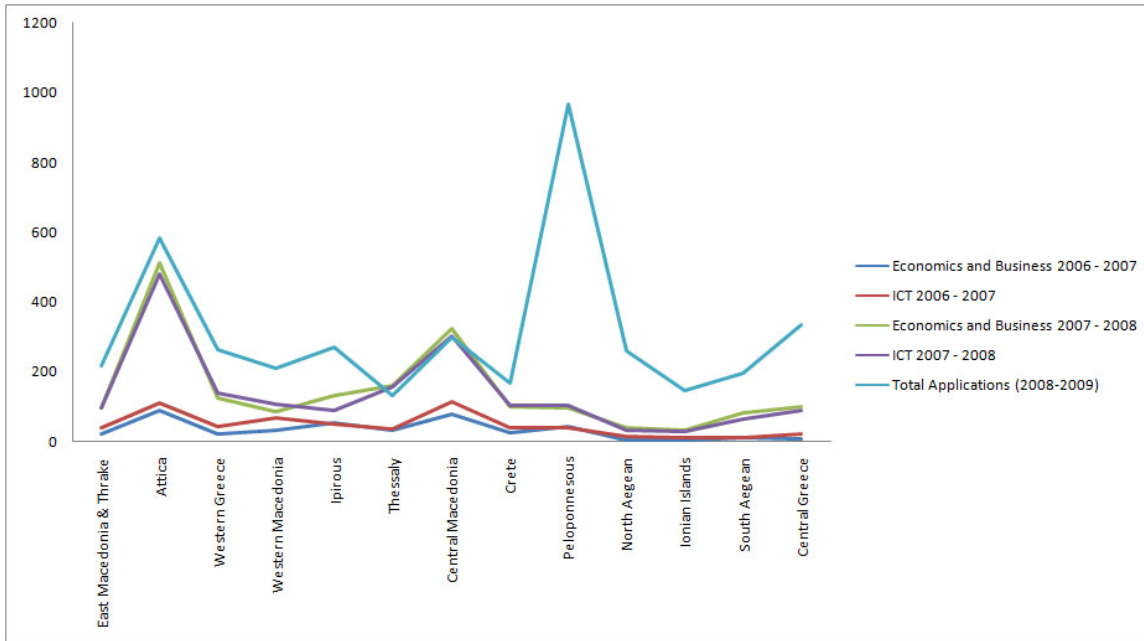


Figure 1. Number of Applications

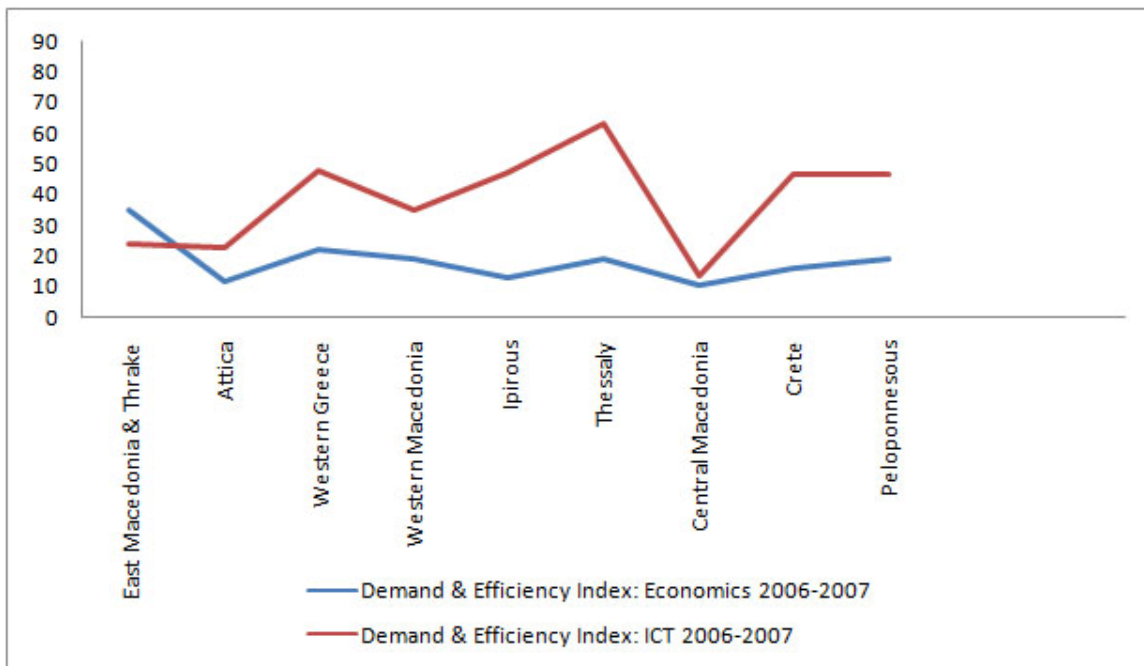


Figure 2. Demand & Efficiency Index for Business and Economics and ICT 2006-2007

The demand for such programs and consequently their viability is also confirmed by a qualitative study on the attitude of students towards KEEENAP programs. This study was carried out in the form of ex-post evaluation using short questionnaires. Although it is outside of the scope of this paper to present the results from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of these questionnaires, findings show the learners' satisfaction and willingness not only to enroll to lifelong e-learning programs in the future. The only issue that seems to be or their main concern is the lack of accreditation of these programs. As a matter of fact, all students can give exams for getting accreditation on ICT skills. However, KEEENAP just offers a certification of successful attendance and not accreditation similar to the ones that can be gained from organizations like ECDL, and Cambridge.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study tried to present the main parts of the Greek governmental policies for lifelong e-Learning and its impact in Greek society. The concept and organization of these programs is directly related to and affected by European policy and Lisbon strategy. It is still quite early to make firm conclusions about the effectiveness of these policies. The high rates of acceptability and efficiency of the three first lifelong e-learning programs can lead to the conclusion that adult learners in Greece appreciated them. The encouraging remarks for the effectiveness of the respective e-learning method are also indicative of the existence of a considerably large pool of possible students for similar programs. On the other hand, the lack of accreditation and the low rate of acceptance of candidate students are issues which seem to affect this initiative.

It is obvious that Greek government needs to spend even more money in meeting the high demand for such programs. As a matter of fact, it is important (and urgent) for the Greek government to perform an evaluation of the return of investment policy in order to measure the sustainability of KEEENAP which seems to be the key player in the new market of lifelong e-learning services in Greece.

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