

Examining the relationship between students' engagement and socioeconomic background in higher education

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute an analysis of student engagement as a key predictor of academic performance, persistence and retention in higher education and consequently academic success. Issues of engagement and developing a sense of belonging lie at the heart of both retention and study success. The research aims to examine students' academic and social engagement on the basis of socio-economic family background, analyzed through Bourdieu-inspired capital approach in HE studies, which explains various forms of inequalities and exclusions of students in HE, related to entry experience, participation and peer support or interaction. Statistical analysis, data and semi-structured interviews show that there is a strong relationship between socio-economic family background and student engagement demonstrating that persistent social inequalities affect student success. Research results support that academic success strategies must account for socioeconomic factors, aside from institutional or individual drivers, as a result of the increasing heterogeneity of students and growing attendance.

Keywords: cultural and economic capital, student engagement, higher education, student success

Introduction

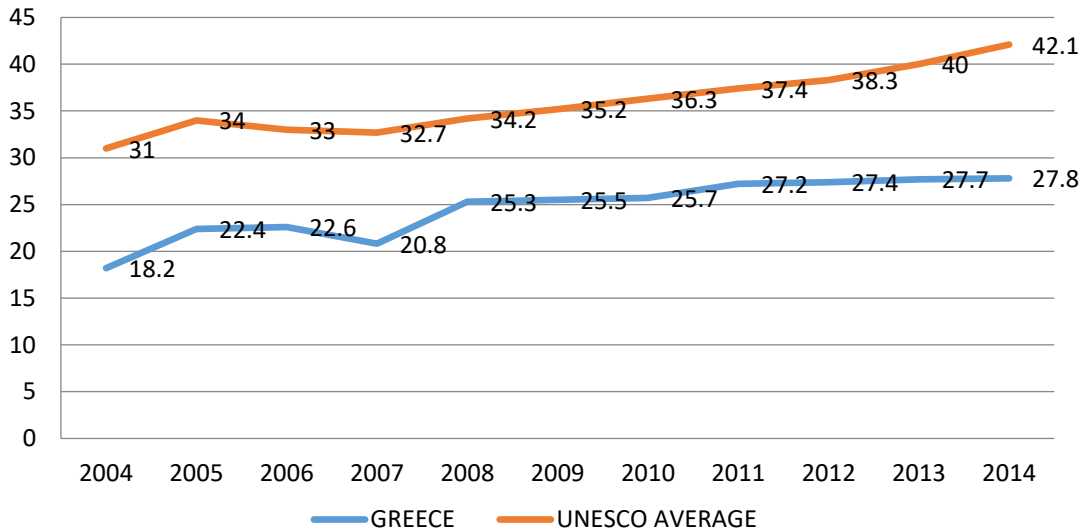
In recent decades, growing attendance in higher education has prompted educational research to examine the factors underpinning academic success (Thangavelu, Partridge, Carey, O'Sullivan & Lutvey, 2019; Troxel, 2010). Academic success is when all students are engaged and effective learners in higher education thus improving their academic outcomes, experiences and engagement (Thomas 2012:10). Student engagement, as a theoretical concept, is the outcome of a general process that is associated with academic success and is considered to be among the best predictors for learning and completion of studies. It has many dimensions and can be seen from many perspectives (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Trowler, 2010, Zekpe, 2015). As an educational concept, student engagement is contextualized through a diverse set of dimensions, both individual and institutional. According to the former, student engagement includes student participation in educationally effective practice, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Quaye & Harper, 2014). A review of 44 studies show that student engagement, as an internal process, consists of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement (Kahu, 2013). Cognitive and behavioral indicators of engagement include the cognitive strategies that students use to learn. Similarly, Maguire, Egan, Hyland, and Maguire (2017) indicate emotional intelligence as a

predictor of cognitive engagement while other researchers are in support of academic, social and affective engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

As such, higher education institutions are liable to improve the success of their student body's attainment by increasing their engagement (Astuti, Sumarwan&Qayim, 2016; Petty, 2014, Kuh, 2009) and retention levels (Tinto 1997, 2006-07, 2009, 2012). The Higher Education Funding for England (HEFCE) defines engagement as "the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience" (Trowler, 2010:7). In other words, student engagement "represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009). Zepke and Leach (2010) summarize 93 research studies from ten countries to develop "a conceptual organizer for student engagement that consists of four perspectives: student motivation; students and teachers' transactions; institutional support; and engagement for active citizenship". Internationally, the majority of research examines student engagement through a number of macro-social factors (e.g. contextual and institutional) (Petty, 2014, Kuh, 2009) and micro-social, internal or individual factors (e.g. personal) (Tinto, 2012; Thomas, 2020; Zhang, Hu & McNamara, 2015; Astuti et al. 2016; Burch, Heller, Burch, Freed & Steed, 2015).

Student engagement in Greek higher education is a challenging topic in relation to other European countries given the fact that graduation rate in Greece remains below the average of other countries. According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2018-2019), the number of undergraduate students enrolled in 2017-2018 increased by 4.1% compared to 2016-2017 (409,413 instead of 426,058) in all educational institutions. The number of students who successfully completed their studies in 2017-2018 was increased by only 0.1%. Access in higher education increased opposite to graduation rates in the country's institutions. The HE graduation rate in Greece is close to 10% lower in comparison with the average HE graduation rate of the UNESCO countries (more than 40% for 2014), as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Average graduation rate in percentage (%) from Greek Higher Education establishments (2004-2014)



Source: ADIP 2016

Taking into consideration that academic success in Greek higher education is defined by having completed a study course within the set time period of 4 years (OECD 2016:13), it can be supposed that low engagement rates are observed in Greek higher education. In this study, student engagement, as it is perceived in Greek context, refers to the outcome of a process in which students are successfully engaged to academic life included learning and teaching, peer interaction and communication as well as adaptability to the academic environment. It is worth mentioning that higher education institutions are public and they are free of charge. There are no fees. The duration of studies is 4 -5 years. Greece has the largest percentage compared to other EU countries in terms of its population (ADIP, 2016) (6,58%). According to official data, there is still a poor connection between higher education institutions and the labor market in Greece. The employability rates are still lower than other European countries (European Commission, 2015). Students enter Greek universities on the basis of the score achieved at the nationwide exams conducted and supervised by the Greek Ministry of Education at the end of upper secondary education. This is a highly competitive process and when the demand outnumbers the available places, as often occurs for many prestigious departments, the students with the higher grades are admitted (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). Therefore, the Greek HE system is considered to be selective on the basis of the demand that leads to high admission qualifications at least for specific universities/departments, although there are no official ranking tables for Greek universities. Moreover, students coming from disadvantaged groups face problems that have a strong impact on their performance, completion of their studies and their academic trajectories (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010).

Unlike most studies, this paper examines student engagement through a socio-cultural perspective focused on the impact of socioeconomic background on student experience. Theorists like Thomas (2020), Soria, Stebleton and Huesman (2013) and Petty (2014) have argued that many students akin to being 'á fish out of water' because of their cultural difference, illustrating their barriers to be engaged to institutional habitus. We draw on Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu 1986) as well as on empirical studies which follow Bourdieusian approaches elaborating on

the 'institutional habitus' as the mean of structuring students' university experiences in the academic field of practice (Thomas, 2002). The individual habitus of HE participants is structured by their past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing, educational experiences, tradition and other aspects of culture but also contributes to shape current and future practices in the field of education. Their habitus shapes their dispositions to choose what is seen as valuable and as commendable according to Bourdieu (1986). In other words, as Bourdieu (1990, 77) states: "Agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances". Although habitus is primarily structured by early experiences in the family (Bourdieu, 1986), it is continually restructured by other contexts. Therefore, habitus can transcend the social conditions of its production. In that perspective, 'institutional habitus' is considered to be an amalgam of structure and agency; institutional habitus is regarded as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organization (Thomas, 2002).

From an individual level, different types of capital, cultural and economic, affect student engagement and success in higher education. (Soria, Stebleton&Huesman, 2013; Sianou- Kyrgiou, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou&Tsiplakides, 2009, 2011; Reay et al. 2005, 2009, 2010). Cultural capital refers to the amount of individual internalized characteristics such as knowledge, attitudes, and skills that a person acquires from their immediate family environment. Economic capital refers to what a person owns (financial situation). Socio-economic background could therefore be defined as an economic and social indicator that measures a person's cultural and economic capital compared to the rest of the population, based on the level of education, occupation and income. According to Bourdieu (1986), socioeconomic background is perceived as the result of the accumulation of various forms of capital. In other words, is determined by the combination of what someone owns (economic capital), who knows (social capital) and what he knows (cultural capital).

A meta-analysis involving 35 relevant studies show that students from a low socioeconomic background (low SES) are less integrated than those from a privileged environment (Rubin 2012). From a sociological point of view, much research reveals that even if students make a regular effort to participate in academic pursuits, their habitus (=dispositions to act in certain ways) is much more responsible for their actions (Soria, Stebleton&Huesman, 2013; Ainley 2012; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Differences in socioeconomic background may lead to differences in academic and social engagement that ultimately affects the degree of "commitment" to their studies (Soria, Stebleton&Huesman, 2013; Walpole 2003; Aries & Seider 2005, 2007). Students whose habitus is at odds with that of their higher education institution are more likely to feel that they do not fit in, that their cultural practices are inappropriate, and their tacit knowledge is undervalued, being so, more inclined to early withdrawal (Thomas, 2002). In short, these students are not likely to communicate with their peers, and instead remain isolated, "outsiders" from academic life. They are less likely to be a member of an academic community and should they complete their studies they are unlikely to see themselves as graduates, as a result of not having developed corresponding educational expectations and experiences (Zhou et al., 2008; Thomas, 2002: 431). In the same context, an academic success model was created by researchers which argues that the extent to which a student benefits from higher education is strongly influenced on parental education (Feinstein, Duckworth

&Sabates, 2004). Under these circumstances, successful engagement may become a painful path because it means that students have to forsake their previous identity, overcome their cultural characteristics and their family ethos.

The following research is in response to the absence of data available on student engagement in a Greek higher educational setting, despite the fact that, as mentioned above, the number of students who deliberately exceed their stay in HE beyond the standard 4 or 5 year study period has significantly increased in the last decade. European countries such as Croatia, Finland and France provide a systematic overview of student composition based on completion and dropout rates, thanks to tools such as the Engagement Survey (UKES), which it is not the case in the Greek context. The importance of this study is to identify the gap in the process followed by Greek university students in order to succeed in higher education given the fact that the reasons behind the non-completion are not yet clearly identified. Especially, the research aims to examine students' academic and social engagement related to entry experience, participation and peer support or interaction on the basis of students' socio-economic family background. With this in mind, we aim to explore student perceptions about their experience regarding to the following three characteristics: pre-entry factors, academic development and support, friendship and peer support.

The paper will address the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between students' socioeconomic background and the first-year academic engagement experience? (pre-entry factors)
2. Is there a relationship between students' socioeconomic background and participation in academic life? (academic development and support)
3. Is there a relationship between students' socioeconomic background and peer support and interaction? (friendship and peer support)

Methodology

Context

Research data was collected in 2015 from the University of Ioannina in North-western Greece. The University of Ioannina was established in 1964. It includes 22 academic departments which altogether number about 13,500 undergraduate students and approximately 3,500 postgraduate students. It is one of the most prominent academic institutions in Greece. It is centralized, not highly selective, and all its departments are located on a campus offering students the possibility to establish a common academic profile. Also, it is long established, in the sense that it is composed of experienced academic staff and offers a well-organized curriculum program. Given the fact that international research data provides that high engagement levels are strongly associated with low dropout rates, the University of Ioannina is expected to be composed of students with high academic and social engagement in relation to other Greek institutions. Despite the fact that the aforementioned institutional characteristics are likely to improve student engagement in this University in particular, many students fail to complete their studies within the standard allocated 4- or 5-year study course. According to Hellenic Statistical Authority, 41.94% of students enrolled at the University of Ioannina in 2012 had not completed their studies within the standard allocated period and 18% of students had

dropped out entirely. For example, 2,921 students were enrolled in the university in the academic year 2000 but they had not completed their studies up to the year 2014.

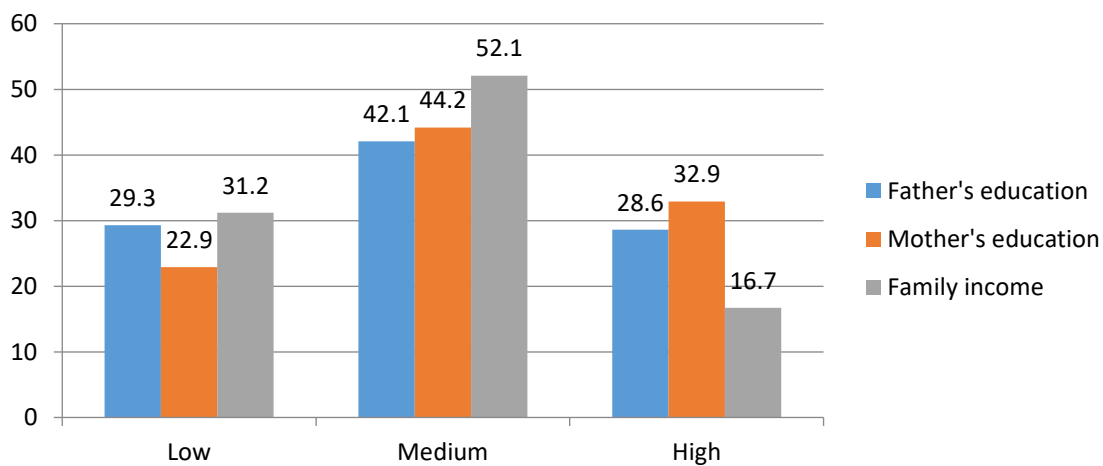
Methods and data analysis

Research was carried out employing a quantitative and qualitative methodology. We conducted triangulation, in other words, "the usage of two or more methods of data collection that can shed light on new dimensions in social research" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 189). In the first stage (quantitative methodology), students were asked to answer a questionnaire about their study experience. The data collected was analyzed on SPSS using Pearson's correlation and regression analysis based on the significance level (the p-value). In the next stage, we conducted semi-structured interviews (qualitative methodology) with a limited number of lower socioeconomic background students (40) who took part in an in-depth analysis of their experiences. Emails were sent to students during initial recruitment, further participants were recruited via telephone contact. Students participated in the interviews with the average length of each interview being 35 minutes. Participants were also required to provide consent before each interview and were provided with a project information sheet. The researcher made participants aware of the project, the interview process and their right to withdraw. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using pre-determined questions, and this method allowed the interviewer to examine the topic in greater depth and explore the student engagement experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Ethics approval was attained prior to the commencement of recruitment. Theories and methods of content analysis were exploited for analysis. The inductive form of analysis was followed with special caution; that is to say, through the recording of the individual testimonies the general analysis classes emerged. In more detail, the interviews were read many times in order for the researcher to get acquainted with the answers of the respondents but also to understand the information that was extracted. The coding process was done by classifying the extracts into the broader analysis classes. The analysis of the material was based on the analysis categories created by the coding of the answers and queries.

The survey is based on a sample of 618 undergraduate students in the 4th (51%), 5th (24%) and 6th (25%) year of their studies (31.1% males and 68.9% females) from all faculties of the institution. Students who continued but have delayed their studies were only included in the research sample. The questionnaires contain items defining the students' socioeconomic background examining cultural and economic variables such as parental education and family income. Following Bourdieu's theory, family income is used as economic capital variable and parental education as cultural capital variable. The family income variable is based on the student's answer to the following question: "What is the total monthly family income?". Answers are divided into three categories: (1) low income (from 0 to 1500 euros per month), (2) medium income (from 1501 to 2500 euros per month) and (3) high income (above 2501 euros per month). The parental education variable is reflected in this question: "What is the highest educational level your parents have attained?". Following the CASMIN educational classification, three categories of parental education were considered: (1) low level (parents have attained primary level education), (2) medium level (parents have attained a secondary level education) and (3) high level (parents have

attained a higher education degree). Parental occupation was not measured because the analysis data reveal that Greek people, under the influence of the economic crisis, work in lower status employment in comparison to their qualifications and their cultural and social capital. With this in mind, we did not include this variable.

Figure 2: Student cultural capital distribution (father's and mother's education and family income)



Findings

Pre-entry interventions

This study contributes to an analysis on student perceptions regarding four pre entry interventions in an attempt to examine if there is a relationship between students' socioeconomic background and the academic engagement experience. Specifically, we asked (YES/NO questions) students if, when they got into the University, a) they lacked organizational skills in order to participate in academic learning and teaching, b) they considered withdrawing in the first year, c) they didn't realize to prepare themselves for getting into higher education and if d) they have developed realistic expectations. Students, to the highest percentage, answered that they lacked organizational skills preventing them from participating in academic learning and teaching process (52,4% of students gave a positive answer). In a smaller percentage (45.5%), students demonstrated that they have not developed realistic or clear expectations and 38.1% of them argued that they had considered withdrawing in the first year of their studies. Finally, 35.6% of students did not consider themselves well prepared to manage with their duties. We can conclude that the lack of organizational skills as well as the fact that students failed to develop academic and future expectations for their studies are the most influential factors to student's engagement on the basis of pre entry interventions.

χ^2 analyses reveal that since the p-value is not greater than our chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), there is enough evidence to suggest an association between family income and student perspectives regarding the lack of organizational skills for

academic study ($\chi^2(2) = 32.60, df=4, p <.001$), as well as the consideration of withdrawing in the first year ($\chi^2(2) = 32.34, df=2, p <.001$). Similarly, there is enough evidence to suggest an association between mothers' education level and student perspectives regarding the lack of organizational skills for academic study ($\chi^2(2) = 12.49, df=4, p =.014$), the consideration of withdrawing in the first year ($\chi^2(2) = 12.18, df=2, p <.001$) as well as the unsuccessful entry preparation ($\chi^2(2) = 7.913, df=2, p =.019$). There was no significant association between the father's educational level and student perceptions.

Qualitative analysis data further supports these results. As already indicated, we interviewed students from lower socioeconomic background, based on their responses in the questionnaire. The research data shows that students usually feel underprepared and face challenges to integrate into the academic environment during their studies. Most of the students stated opinions similar to the following:

"I wanted to study in Athens to be near to my parents. In my first three years in Ioannina I struggled to integrate to the new environment. I would go to Athens very often and I worked as a waitress since I thought the faculty was not very demanding. One semester I did not go to class at all".

Academic development and support

Student perceptions on academic life development and support were examined with the following indicators: a) level of perceived academic growth and development b) participation in groups with advanced scientific interests. The majority of students face challenges and academic problems when accessing higher education. More specifically, the frequencies distribution show that more than 50% of students expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the extent that they have thrived in the University and have been engaged in scientific groups. They are likely to have challenged difficulties in being engaged with the "habitus" of the institution. Only a small percentage of respondents (20.9%) stated having developed an academic profile and that they had participated in groups with common scientific interests (14.5%).

Table 1: Students perspectives on student academic development and participation

	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree or disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
Academic life development	8.6%	12.3%	23%	27.4%	28.7%	100%
Group member with common scientific interests	3.5%	11%	22.4%	39.1%	24%	100%

Pearson's correlation analysis show that the mother's educational level ($\rho=.123$, $p=.002$) is strongly correlated to student perceptions on academic development and support. Moreover, the father's educational level ($\rho=.115$, $p=.005$) and family income ($\rho=.142$, $p=.000$) have a significant impact on students' participation in groups with common scientific interests.

Table 2 reports the results from simple linear regression analysis of independent values (family income, mother's and father's educational level) on academic development and support performance (a new scale has been created based on the two examined survey items). The results show that socioeconomic background is likely to predict students' perceptions on the level of academic development and support (Model A), to a larger extent, mother's educational level ($B=.131$, $p=.000$), and family income ($B=.159$, $p=.000$) as well. Those students who have higher family income and their mother has attained higher educational level perceive more academic growth and development and is more likely to be engaged in groups with common scientific interests. On the other hand, father's educational level ($B=-.013$, $p>.000$) is not one of the variables that seem to be statistically significant.

Table 2: Simple linear regression analysis on the examined survey items

Models	A	B
	Academic development and support	Friendship and peer interaction
Constant	2.838***(0.109)	1.939***(0.176)
Family income	.159***(0.050)	.260***(0.082)
Father's educational level	-.013 (0.035)	-.045 (0.060)
Mother's educational level	.131***(0.035)	.242*** (0.059)
R-squared	0.083	0.016
Adjusted R-squared	0.078	0.010
No. observations	618	

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.
 *** indicates significance at the 95% level.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews provide a clearer picture of the above:

"While at university I was bored, I did not like the faculty, the lessons were boring. In the third year I moved to the university dormitory, it was boring, and integrating was a struggle. I did not like studying and I told my parents that I wanted to give up, to return home and find a job"

Friendship and peer interaction

In this study, student perceptions on peer support were examined according to the following indicators: a) peer support and interaction and b) social engagement. The frequencies distribution show that only 22.1% of students expressed disagreement or strong disagreement about the interaction with their peers. Opposite, 54.9% of them argued that they have developed a strong peer interaction during their studies. They do not seem to have challenged difficulties in developing social networks. According to social engagement, 39.4% of students are satisfied with their social integration but 28.9% of them are not. 31.7% of students have not expressed a clear opinion about the extent they have felt socially integrated to the academic environment namely participation to extracurricular activities or cooperative learning.

Table 3: Students' perspectives on friendship and peer interaction

	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
Interaction with peers	26.3%	28.6%	23%	12.8%	9.3%	100%
Social engagement	13.5%	25.9%	31.7%	15.6%	13.3%	100%

Regarding the influence of students' socioeconomic background, Pearson's correlation analysis show that the family income ($r=.100$, $p=.015$) have an impact on students' peer support and interaction. Moreover, mother's educational level ($r=.094$, $p=.022$) and father's educational level ($r=.096$, $p=.019$) are associated with peer support and interaction. Family income is also linked to a significant extent on students' social engagement ($r=.434$, $p=.000$).

Table 2 reports the results of a series of simple linear regression analysis of the one of the examined student engagement factors, that is friendship and peer interaction. Model B introduces a series of socioeconomic factors as predictors that influence students' perceptions on peer support and interaction as well as social engagement (a new scale has been created based on the two examined survey items). Regression analysis results show that socioeconomic background and specially family income ($B=.260$, $p=.000$) and almost, to a same extent, mother's educational

level ($B=.242$, $p=.000$) are likely to predict students' perceptions on the basis of the extent that they have developed friendship and have interacted with their peers. In other words, students who have high family income and their mother has attained higher educational level are more likely to develop stronger relations with their peers.

Discussion

The aim of the study, as already mentioned, is to shed light on the relationship between student engagement and socioeconomic background, an issue at the centre of research interest internationally. From this point of view, this research fills a gap in the Greek research literature on student engagement and provides with important empirical material for further exploring institutional practice regarding curricula, learning resources, student support services and public information. Nonetheless, prior to discussing the findings, we need to acknowledge the research limitations.

The first question concerned student perceptions on their pre-entry factors in HE, the lack of organizational skills in order to participate in academic learning and teaching, the consideration of withdrawing in the first year, the preparation for getting into higher education and the development of realistic expectations. The majority of students reported that they did not develop organizational skills. They also did not improve future expectations about their studies. To a lesser extent, the students presupposed they would give up their studies because they did not feel enough prepared to get access to the University. The extent to which students encountered these difficulties during their studies is linked to their socio-economic background (family income and mother's educational level) and hence their cultural and economic capital. Taking the results into consideration, it is evident (statistically significant difference) that students from lower socioeconomic background experienced greater challenges in obtaining access to the University and therefore did not successfully engage. Students usually feel underprepared and face challenges to integrate into the academic environment during their studies. These results are further supported by previous research that indicates pre-entry characteristics can largely contribute to improving retention and success in HE (Raciti & Dale, 2019; Quayle & Harper, 2014; Thomas, 2011, Kuh 2009). More specifically, according to Thomas, pre-entry interventions contribute to in the following ways: a) provide information, knowledge and skills to improve pre-entry decision making; b) develop expectations and adequately prepare for academia; c) encourage early engagement and increase social capital (Thomas, 2011).

With respect to the second research question, many students stated that they did not develop the appropriate academic profile and that they did not participate in groups with common scientific interests. The statistical analysis showed that father's educational level and family income are closely linked to a significant degree to integration into the academic life. Moreover, mother's educational level and family income are factors that can predict the extent to which students are likely to integrate into the academic life and participate in groups with common scientific interests. Totally, as previous researchers have already indicated (Rubin 2012; Soria et al., 2013; Ainley 2012; Reay et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)

socioeconomic background is likely to predict students' perceptions on the level of academic development and support. Students with a higher socioeconomic background perceive more academic growth and development and is more likely to be engaged in groups with common scientific interests.

According to the last research question, the majority of students developed good relationship with their fellow students. Promoting social engagement contributes to the development of a “sense of belonging” and provides support through interaction with friends and peers. However, the data indicates that not all students develop socialization to the same extent. Several students have not developed a good relationship or have not expressed a clear view of the issue. The degree of socialization and peer interaction is linked to family income and mother’s educational level. The study indicates that students with a higher family income and mother who have attained higher education degree are more likely to socially engage in the academic environment. There is a strong relationship between student engagement and student socioeconomic background. These finding contribute to the viewpoint that student’s social engagement is socially stratified. Social class has a strong impact on student engagement, and positively predict academic success and active engagement in the institutional habitus (Thomas, 2012; Bourdieu,1986).

In total, analysis offers a holistic evaluation of the relationship between student engagement and socioeconomic background revealing that individual and institutional factors are likely not to be sufficient measures to predict student engagement in academic environment. In Greece there are no surveys investigating this issue. From a research perspective, the examination of institutional and individual factors must be accompanied by necessary social parameters in order to gain greater insight on the factors contributing to academic success in higher education. Under these circumstances, a sociocultural view of academic success has been taken into account because of an existing heterogeneous student body as an effect of the growing participation in Higher education. As Tinto points out, engagement is a process of lasting interactions between the individual and the academic and social environments, in which personal experiences are constantly evolving leading to retention or drop out, but low engagement rates cannot be easily explained by such perspectives (Tinto, 1975, 94). Academic success strategies in Greek higher education have to account for socioeconomic factors, aside from institutional or individual drivers, as a result of the increasing heterogeneity of students and growing attendance. This paper further provides with new evidence regarding the need to build academic and peer support programs in order to enhance the student engagement from non-privileged groups, creating collaborative learning (Solomonides, Reid, & Petocz, 2012) and fostering cooperative relationships, recognizing that teaching and teachers are central to engagement (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017), enabling students to work autonomously, boosting them to enjoy peer interaction, making them feel competent that they are able to achieve their own goals, developing educational experiences, enriching and extending their academic abilities, ensuring that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, support services are to be organized with the aim to contribute to the increased quality of student expectations. More specifically, in order for the institutions to improve academic entry requirements, summer schools’ programs accompanied by mentoring and counselling services appropriate to disadvantaged students can be implemented.

Moreover, education stakeholders can establish partnerships between high schools and universities to consolidate the idea that higher education is a potential way for everyone. Besides, gaining access to flexibility, including transformation actions in the structure, administration and implementation of tertiary programs are considered tasks of high importance.

Apart from covering a gap in the literature on academic success and university student support practices in Greek higher education system, this study produced results that can critically inform at two levels. First, it permits a deeper understanding of the changing and complex social nature of the highly differentiated students' population "needs". Accordingly, it reflects on the various kinds of interventions for supporting students, such as scholarships, academic mentoring, career counselling, psychological support etc., that can promote and establish strong notions of social justice and inclusion for higher education sector, especially in favour of less privileged students. This study provides with data that are helpful for stakeholders to develop clearer picture of policies and practices towards supporting disadvantaged students at university on the Greek context that is very limited examined. Moreover, it informs local stakeholders who need to collaborate and exchange information about best practice and positive interventions in order to better support disadvantaged students. In this context, it can be argued that policy changes should be responded to the increased diversity of student population, combating inequalities and eliminate discriminations setting in the centre of interest the question how HE governance is played out in terms of inclusion and governing student engagement.

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