

# Shooting a moving target: The Sisyphus boulder of increasing participation in adult education during the period of economic crisis

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## Abstract

This article presents a study conducted after the onset of the economic crisis in Greece. The study lasted for more than five years and was organized by the Research Institutes of Trade Union Confederation of Greece and the Hellenic Small Enterprises Institute of the Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants. Using a mixed methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, we attempt to investigate participation in adult education and record the reasons and barriers which shape participation patterns. Data presented in this article show that participation has increased in Greece, and at the same time inequalities are magnified, while the economic crisis seems to be a serious deterrent factor for a further development of adult education. Our goal is to interpret those findings based on developments of contemporary Greek society with regard to the meaning that participants attribute to the factors affecting their participation.

## Keywords

Participation, reasons, motives, barriers, Greece, economic crisis

## Introduction

According to Crowther (2000, p. 479), participation is “perhaps the most ploughed furrow in adult education research.” Starting from the seminal work by Houle

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(1961) and his classical typology on adult learners, for over 50 years adult education researchers worldwide study theoretical approaches and conduct research in order to explore participation levels, motives and reasons, as well as barriers that determine, enhance, or reduce participation. According to Coombs typology for educational activities (Coombs, 1968), *formal* education refers to the established educational system, *nonformal* education to any kind or organized educational activities outside the formal educational system, while *informal* education comprises learning occurred in noneducational settings (libraries, family, etc.). In Greece, adult education is based on two pillars, namely continuing vocational training and general adult education. The term general adult education refers to all adult education activities (in terms of Coombs typology, all nonformal education addressed to adults) aiming at nonvocational dimensions (leisure time, parents education, cultural education, citizenship).

This paper presents the findings of a relative attempt in Greece, aiming to form an interpretive model regarding the participation of adults in nonformal educational activities in Greece (both continuing vocational training and general adult education) and the inequalities that derive from it.

## Theoretical background

Participation in adult education, even in the initial systematic theoretical attempts for the development of a theoretical model, was not regarded as simply a matter of choice and free will, but as something that is influenced by personal as well as social and structural issues. As stated by Verner and Newberry (1958, p. 208) "...the decision to participate or not rests with the individual adult and is influenced by factors that are components of both the personality and the social group life of the individual involve." Subsequently, certain determinants were identified, such as socioeconomic status, age, sex, family stage, residence, religion, race, and ethnic group. Already, at an early time, the limited research data available lead to a finding that would later become commonplace, as it appears as a conclusion in most international surveys: "adult education is widening the gap between the educated and the educationally unprivileged" (o.c., p. 219).

Literature for participation in adult education is coming from different contexts in different periods and covers a wide variety of types of adult education provision; therefore we will try to refer to some characteristic theoretical approaches. The first well-known systematic research of motives for participation is attributed to Houle, who investigated in the early 1960s the reasons for adult learners' participation based on a qualitative approach, carrying out in-depth interviews with 22 learners who participated in several types of adult education programs. Based on the findings of that research, Houle suggested a typology of adult learners, distinguishing three different types of learners, goal, activity, and learning oriented. A similar research was conducted later by Tough (1968) with in-depth interviews of 35 learners, reaching the basic conclusion that learners participate in a program not for only one, but for many and diverse reasons (an average of 5.4 reasons per

participant), while one of the most important findings of his research was the desire of participants to apply the knowledge they had obtained from the program.

Cross (1977, 1981) dealt extensively with the motives and the barriers to learning. Based on research findings from the United States concerning the participation of adults in nonformal educational activities, he reached the conclusion that of all the factors influencing participation, the most influential was the level of participation in formal education, i.e. the educational level of the individual. Several models have been introduced at times, in order to interpret adult participation in learning activities, combining the examination of adult features characteristics, motives, and incentives, as well as constraining factors involved in these processes. Merriam and Caffarella (1999, pp. 60–71) have extensively referred to these models, highlighting that further research is needed to determine their value for the interpretation and prediction of participation.

In regards to the factors/reasons of adult participation in educational programs, we will mostly rely on those that are defined by the Educational Participation Scale (EPS), designed by Boshier who extended Houles' research. Based on the EPS, these factors are grouped into six categories: social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, professional advancement, escape/stimulation, and cognitive interest (Boshier, 1971, 1973, 1991; Boshier & Collins, 1985; Morstain & Smart, 1977).

Regarding the barriers to participation, the most common and widely used typology is that of Cross (1977, 1981), where barriers are divided into three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional. According to Cross (1981, p. 98) the *situational* barriers include factors such as lack of time due to professional and home responsibilities, financial difficulties, child care or transportation, *institutional* barriers include inconvenient schedules or locations, inappropriate courses, while *dispositional* barriers are related to attitudes and self-perceptions (e.g. too old to learn, no ability to learn). Furthermore, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009, p. 195) group barriers into two categories: *structural* (family, work, and institutionally related barriers, i.e. situational and institutional according to Cross' typology) and *dispositional* (capabilities and consciousness), proposing the Bounded Agency Model in order to interpret the differences in participation rates observed in Western societies:

The Bounded Agency Model is based on the assumption that the nature of welfare state regimes can affect a person's capability to participate... the state can foster broad structural conditions... that are aimed at overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers.

We should note that the consideration of participation as a central issue has received noticeable criticism in the context of the contemporary literature of adult education. The main arguments relate to *who* determines that nonparticipation is a problem, and to the degree of the learners' *active* participation (Ahl, 2006; Bagnall, 1989; Crowther, 2000).

## Analyzing the context: Adult education in Greece

The first activities of adult education in Modern Greek society arise at the end of the 19th century, but these are sporadic and without a strong institutional basis, mainly implemented by the voluntary or private sector. Boucouvalas (1988) in her emblematic work about the historical development of adult education in Greece attributes these first attempts to a small number of educational and social groups, while Vergidis (1985, 1995) reaches the conclusion that until the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, the greatest part of adult education activities had an intense political and ideological orientation.

After entering the European Economic Community in 1981 (and later the European Union 1993 and the Eurozone 2001), developments in adult education in Greece are intensively influenced by the policies and the funding of the European Structural Funds, resulting in a huge quantitative, and in many cases qualitative, development of adult education in Greece (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004). The most significant developments were the formation of an accreditation system for about 500 organizations of continuing vocational training and the creation ex nihilo of a system for the education and accreditation of more than 15,000 educators of continuing vocational training and general adult education. Simultaneously (1981), for the first time in the postwar period, Greece was governed by a socialist party, which had as a main pillar of its program the upgrading of Popular Education in Greece (Karalis & Pavlis-Korres, 2010, p. 380). In the years that followed, institutions were developed, such as continuing vocational education and general adult education organizations (indicatively: Centers of Vocational Training, Lifelong Learning Centers, Parent Schools, Adult Education Centers, Second Chance Schools) and a large number of programs were implemented. However, participation in adult education remained low. According to the official statistics service of the European Union, during 2000–2006, Greece occupied the third from last position among the 27 Member States, based on the percentage of adults that participated in any program the last month before the research (EUROSTAT, 2015). The participation percentage for Greece was four to seven times lower than the average rate in the member states, while in a special research conducted by Eurostat measuring participation on an annual basis, Greece ranked second to last with a percentage of 17.4% for the year 2003. The factors that could explain this phenomenon according to Kokkos is the preference for formal education as opposed to nonformal because the former offers a higher degree of certification and recognition. Another reason is that an adult education movement connected to social movements was not developed over time in Greece, in addition to the weaknesses of civil society and the low quality and efficiency of the offered programs (Kokkos, 2005). Relevant studies in the Greek context show that benefits from participation in adult education are primarily deployable at private level, being diffused into social benefits at later stage (Panitsides, 2013), while barriers to participation in other European Union member states are related more to cultural, structural, and socioeconomic issues rather than to inadequacies at a policy level (Zarifis, 2012).

Since 2010 Greece is going through the most severe economic crisis of its modern history, with dramatic consequences in all aspects of social and economic life. Social structures that existed for over 30 years deadened rapidly, working patterns changed, unemployment rates raised from 7.7% (2008) to 27.3% (2013) and salaries were reduced dramatically while indirect taxation increased (Kokkos, Koulaouzides, & Karalis, 2014, p. 102; Pouloupoulos, 2014). In this bleak context, the participation of adults in educational activities is an area of special interest for two reasons. The first reason is that in such conditions it is expected to be more difficult for adults to participate. The second reason, however, is that in times of recession and social disintegration, adult education can perhaps enable people to find routes through the crisis.

Given the aforementioned ground, the Research Institutes of the two largest Unions of the country decided to develop a research program about participation in adult education in Greece. More specifically, the Labor Institute of Trade Union Confederation of Greece (INE GSEE) that represents workers and employees of the private sector and The Small Enterprises Institute of the Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (IME GSEVEE) representing self-employed and owners of very small enterprises decided to develop a research program to depict participation rates, motives, and barriers to participation.

## **Methodological issues**

### *Research design*

The research presented herein was designed a year after the onset of the economic and social crisis and was implemented in two stages: the first stage of the research was based on a qualitative and quantitative approach and investigated the participation of adults in learning activities during the year 2011. The research targeted employees of the private sector, self-employed and unemployed. During this first phase, it was considered necessary to include a qualitative approach in order to investigate the extent to which the questions were understood by the respondents, mainly questions referred to factors of international literature that possibly did not produce meaning in the country's cultural context.

The second stage of the research, which took place two years after the first stage, was based only on a quantitative approach and concerned the investigation of participation during the year 2013. This phase referred to a larger population, including public servants, so as to cover all active population in terms of occupational status. We have to clarify that public servants were excluded from the first phase of the research not for methodological reasons but due to organizational and financial constraints. More specifically, the first phase was funded by EU funds, with specific orientations for targeted populations, while the second phase did not have any limitation.

The research presented herein is the first conducted in Greece, based on both a quantitative and a qualitative approach at a synchronic basis.



### *Instruments*

The main research tool was the Participation, Reasons, Barriers (PRB) Questionnaire developed by Karalis (2013, p. 215) and based on previous research tools so as to include all factors affecting participation. For example, factors referred by Boshier (1971), Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974), Cross (1981), Morstain and Smart (1977), Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) were carefully and to a great extent taken into consideration, having in mind the need for adaptation of all factors to the Greek context. In total, 14 factors related to reasons and motives were included and 22 related to barriers. Following the first publication of the research results, the PRB questionnaire was used by other researchers in Greece to investigate participation in specific target groups (e.g. teachers, trade unionists, engineers, students of initial vocational training, nutritionists).

### *Quantitative research*

For both research phases, data collection was conducted by the public opinion organization MARC so as to ensure the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of results in the relevant population. MARC is one of the most active public opinions organizations in Greece, being at the same time a member of World Association of Public Opinion Research and European Society of Marketing Research. The selection of respondents was based on a multistage stratified sampling for the above-mentioned populations in Greece, in order to ensure representativeness of the adult population in Greece. During the first phase (participation during the year 2011), 1200 respondents participated while 1210 participated in the second phase (participation during the year 2013). The questions regarding the levels of participation concerned both vocational training and general adult education for the year before the study. The respondents were asked to give their opinion three times regarding motives and barriers. At first, they were to answer (yes/no) when recognizing each factor (reason or barrier) in their case. Afterward they were asked to choose from the same list of factors the three most important, and finally to choose the most important one.

### *Qualitative research*

As mentioned previously, the qualitative approach was applied only during the first phase of the research, as it was considered necessary in order to explore the social perceptions the subjects have regarding the key questions and factors of the research. Given the fact that we had chosen the factors based on international literature findings, our intention was to explore through in-depth interviews, the meaning given by the individual to each factor and the possibility of the existence of any other reason or barrier to participation that had ignored. Furthermore, questions were included regarding the role of adult education in times of economic crisis, as well as the expectations participants had from adult education. Reaching the 20th interview no new information were observed (saturation point), so we

decided to keep the number of respondents in the initially designed levels (between 20 and 25). In total, 22 interviews were conducted (12 men and 10 women were asked, of them 18 had attended adult education programs and four had not).

## **Findings**

In the following unit, the findings from the qualitative part will be presented, followed by the results of the quantitative investigation for both phases of the research (participation during the years 2011 and 2013).

### *Interviews*

According to the interviews analysis, the factors indicating reasons and barriers are in agreement with the findings of the quantitative part, while the respondents claim they understood the meaning of all relevant questions. Furthermore, there were no new suggestions by the respondents regarding any additional factor than those included in the PRB questionnaire. Several questionnaire findings corroborate the data of the qualitative part and those combined can lead us to explanations regarding the participation of citizens in adult education programs in Greece. More specifically, most of the respondents do not consider obtaining a certificate to be a key motive; even those who do believe it to be of some importance, regard it only as a secondary motive. However, we believe that the main finding of the interviews is the importance the citizens attribute to the institution of adult education as well as their expectations from it, especially in times of crisis. The main tendency for over half of the interviewees is that they consider the role of adult education to be very important; they desire to participate in such programs because it is a way out of the crisis, while in many cases they have high expectations from adult education. It is worth mentioning that in all interviews there are no negative references to adult education. The following answers are indicative:

I believe knowledge is food for the mind. I believe that... people look for ways to escape this whole situation. (female, private sector employee)

Especially in contemporary conditions of crisis and insecurity... the role of adult education is even more essential. Education would definitely help to change our attitudes, our ways of thinking and our perception. (male, self-employed)

But I generally believe that the more difficult the situation people find themselves in, regarding the seriousness of the crisis, insecurity, etc, the more important, for many reasons, it is to be educated. (male, self-employed)

I believe that in times of crisis, adult education is very important... In times of crisis, the negative side is that because people believe that nothing will get better, they get disappointed...". (female, self-employed)

I believe that in time of crisis, you should attend seminars, learn new things and develop. . . . (female, private sector employee)

I believe that the role of adult education is to decrease the insecurity levels of adults. Lifelong learning is probably the only weapon the employee has against unemployment. (female, unemployed)

The importance that a large proportion of interviewees seem to attribute to adult education, considering it as one of the most crucial means for overcoming the crisis personally and/or collectively, was very impressive. As we will ascertain in the quantitative part, the most important reasons for participation are connected with the views addressed in the qualitative part. This fact is what led us to use this particular part of findings of the first research phase as a precursor “indicator” since in the research report of the first phase we had reached the conclusion that when the impact of some barriers is diminished even within the painful crisis, citizen participation could be increased.

### *Participation rates*

In the following unit, we will present findings concerning the participation rates in vocational training and general adult education programs during the two phases of the research, with a reference to the occupational status (Table 1).

The research findings show that during the year 2013, the percentage of adults participating in a vocational training program was 24%. If the percentage of public servants is not included in the 2013 data the rate is 20.9%, while in 2011 the rate was 15.9%, therefore there is an increase of 5%.

Also, for the general adult education programs the participation percentage reached 11.6% in 2013 (11% if public servants are not included), as opposed to 9.2% in 2011. Attempting to capture the number of participants rather than participation, keeping in mind that a percentage of citizens participates in both types of programs (4.2% for 2013 and 3.6% for 2011), it becomes evident that in the year 2013, a 31.4% participated in adult education programs versus 21.5% in 2011. If again we do not include

**Table 1.** Participation percentage in vocational training programs.

Occupation	2011 (%)	2013 (%)
Public servants	n/a	44.6
Private sector employees	21.1	28.8
Self-employed/owners of small enterprises	14.6	24.9
Unemployed	7.9	9.1
Total population	15.9	24.0



the percentage of public servants, the percentage of 2013 amounts to 28.4%, i.e. there is an increase of 6.9 percentage points in 2013 compared to 2011.

Nonparticipants were asked how they substitute participation, meaning how they learn what is necessary for their occupation and how they are informed of developments in their field. During the second phase of the research, the most popular means was the Internet (56.3%) followed by colleagues (30.9%), everyday experience from work (27.8%), and reviewing books and journals (20.8%). It is worth mentioning that a very low percentage (7.9%) believes that they do not need more knowledge and skills in order to meet the requirements of their occupation. Furthermore, the percentage of those who state that if they did not face barriers they would like to participate in adult education programs is very high (68.1% in 2011 and 72.2% in 2013).

### *Reasons for participation*

As mentioned previously, the questions regarding participation reasons, motives, and barriers are based to a great extent on factors that have been identified during the literature review, and especially on the questionnaires used over time to investigate these issues. For both cases (reasons and barriers) respondents gave their opinion three times. The first time they were asked to recognize positively or negatively, a reason or a barrier relevant to their case they also had the possibility of choosing more than one, even all reasons. Then they were asked to choose the three most important reasons and then the one most important. This specific research strategy was chosen in order to get an understanding of the frequency that a reason was found and to give the opportunity to the respondents through a sequential restriction procedure of their choices to declare the most important reasons, and finally limit the reasons to the one most important. We will present some of the data from both phases of the research for the reasons and for the barriers, and specifically the tables with the questions asking, initially to define all factors, and then choose the most important of them.

It is evident that despite the fluctuations in the rates of some of the reasons, findings of the two phases of the study basically remain stable. Moreover, the principal four reasons remain in the same order in both phases. Also, the main tendencies remain the same, that is high percentages are noted concerning factors that can be included in the categories of “cognitive interest” and “professional advancement,” while the increase in the reasons “to maintain my job position” (from 71.8% to 77.3%), “to be more accomplished as a citizen” (from 57.7% to 66.6%), as well as “to give my children a good example” (from 52.6% to 68.9%) can be considered as important.

The table shows that the reasons related to job efficiency and maintaining a job position or finding a better one (including increase in income) are top priorities, when only one of the reasons can be chosen – while it is worth noting that even when only one answer is possible, the reasons connected to the value of learning rank very high. Comparing findings in Tables 2 and 3, we can observe that factors related to job

**Table 2.** Reasons for participation.

Reasons	2011	2013
I like to learn new things	90.0 <sup>a</sup>	89.9 <sup>a</sup>
To be more efficient at my work	86.4	88.9
Because education should be lifelong	85.1	85.5
To increase my qualifications	79.2	81.1
To increase my income	76.3	79.3
To maintain my job position	71.8	77.3
To find a better job	63.9	64.7
To obtain a certificate	58.0	62.4
To be more accomplished as a citizen	57.7	66.6
To meet new people and improve my social network	56.1	54.4
To give my children a good example	52.6	68.9
Because I didn't have the opportunity to study as much as I wanted in the past	50.9	53.8
To make the best of my free time	37.3	43.9
To escape from the problems of personal/family life	21.9	26.5

<sup>a</sup>Percentage %.**Table 3.** Reasons for participation (one choice).

Reasons	2011	2013
To be more efficient at my work	24.3 <sup>a</sup>	20.3 <sup>a</sup>
To keep my job	19.3	16.8
I like to learn new things	17.2	15.2
To increase my income	16.9	18.5
To find a better job	6.2	7.9
Because education should be lifelong	5.7	7.7
To increase my qualifications	3.1	2.6
To meet new people and improve my social network	2.0	2.1
To give my children a good example	1.2	2.3
Because I didn't have the opportunity to study as much as I wanted in the past	1.0	1.3
To be more accomplished as a citizen	1.0	1.8
To obtain a certificate	0.8	0.9
To make the best of my free time	0.5	0.8
To escape from the problems of personal/family life	0.3	0.5
Other	0.2	0.6
n/a	0.3	0.7

<sup>a</sup>Percentage %.

efficiency and more generally to occupational issues are becoming more significant than others (e.g. learn new things) as choices are gradually becoming fewer.

### ***Barriers to participation***

As in the case of the reasons for participation, the findings of both stages of the research concerning barriers to participation remain stable. However, we believe it is necessary to point out that the intensity for some of the factors increased from 2011 to 2013 (mainly factors such as lack time due to obligations connected to work or children care, the selection procedures of the programs, and the lack of the qualifications required for attending the programs). In both phases, the main barrier is participation cost – chosen by eight out of 10 persons asked. High percentages (chosen by about the half of the persons asked) are met in a series of barriers that relate to the way programs are organized and also the lack of time due to work obligations.

In both phases, the main barrier is the participation cost (chosen from 8 out of 10), while almost half of the participants recognize barriers that refer to the way the programs are organized and the lack of time due to occupational obligations.

As we can conclude from the data of Table 5 when participants were asked to state only one reason, the cost of participation was chosen by almost half the persons as the most important barrier. Although it is expected to observe lower rates when just one reason is selected, we have to point out that the next reason appears almost 30% under the participation cost. In general, through the gradual restriction, the barriers maintain the same ranking, and it is remarkable that in all ratings, not one dispositional barrier ranks above the 10th place. We consider this finding as very significant since it is more difficult to confront dispositional barriers than the institutional ones.

Comparing findings in Tables 4 and 5, we can reach the conclusion that some items appear to get more significance (e.g. lack of time due to occupational or family obligations) as we move from all to one choice.

### ***Participation in adult education: A matter of inequality***

One of the most significant research areas in adult education policies is the structure of participation and the profile of adults participating. The key question is to what extent participation concerns all citizens or only specific adult groups, or in other words “do lifelong learning programs succeed to alleviate existing inequalities?” Based on data from both research phases, we can safely assume that what is identified as commonplace in the literature is also applicable in the case of Greece: participants in adult education are these most advantaged of the formal education system, those with a higher level of education. Among the adult education theorists in Greece, Vergidis has extensively referred to the reproduction and deepening of social inequalities of participation in adult education programs (Vergidis, 1995, 2014).

**Table 4.** Barriers to participation.

Barriers	2011	2013
Participation cost	81.4 <sup>a</sup>	82.9 <sup>a</sup>
Lack of information about programs taking place	68.2	70.6
The programs take place at days and times I cannot attend	56.5	62.4
Lack of time due to occupational obligations	48.0	57.5
The quality and the organization of the programs don't reach my standards	47.4	54.2
The programs last too long	44.7	48.1
Transportation difficulties to the venue	42.0	45.0
A certificate of attendance is not provided	29.7	34.2
Lack of time due to other activities	29.2	31.7
Lack of time due to taking care of children	28.3	41.8
I can learn in other ways what I would at a program	26.5	29.7
It is not considered an asset at my working environment	26.1	30.6
Participating in the programs won't improve my position at work	21.4	23.0
The selection procedure, I don't think I will be chosen	19.9	26.9
It don't meet the typical requirements for participation	15.5	21.4
Lack of time due to taking care of relatives	15.3	19.9
I do not have the essential skills required for participation	15.2	20.2
I have learnt enough	10.9	14.2
I have health issues	9.5	12.5
I don't like programs that remind me of school	6.7	8.9
I am too old to learn	6.7	7.3
Negative attitude of family or friends	4.0	5.7

<sup>a</sup>Percentage %.

In order to identify inequalities in participation, we analyzed the ratios of the participation rates for specific characteristics of adults participating in programs, i.e. gender, formal education level, income, and employment status.

The data of Table 6 show that participation may broaden certain inequalities, especially regarding employment status and level of education. In fact, the inequality tendencies regarding employment and education have been magnified during the economic crisis to a great extent. As we can see, a university graduate has almost *three* times higher participation rates than a secondary education graduate and almost *eight* times higher than someone who has only completed primary education. As for the employment status, while analyzing the data we should keep in mind certain labor market conditions in Greece. More specifically, until recently public servants had permanent working positions, while self-employed and

**Table 5.** Barriers to participation (one choice).

Barriers	2011	2013
Participation cost	46.9 <sup>a</sup>	44.1 <sup>a</sup>
Lack of time due to occupational obligations	11.9	12.9
Lack of time due to taking care of children	8.5	12.1
Lack of information about programs taking place	5.9	5.3
Transportation difficulties to the venue	4.9	3.1
The quality and the organization of the programs don't reach my standards	3.3	2.6
The programs take place at days and times I cannot attend	3.2	3.5
The programs last too long	2.1	2.6
Lack of time due to taking care of relatives	2.0	0.9
Lack of time due to other activities	1.9	1.2
I have health issues	1.8	1.9
I can learn in other ways what I would at a program	1.2	1.3
I am too old to learn	1.0	0.9
Participating in the programs won't improve my position at work	0.8	1.1
A certificate of attendance is not provided	0.8	0.9
I have learnt enough	0.5	0.3
The selection procedure, I don't think I will be chosen	0.4	1.2
It is not considered an asset at my working environment	0.4	1.0
It don't meet the typical requirements for participation	0.3	0.4
I don't like programs that remind me of school	0.3	0.3
Negative attitude of family or friends	–	0.1
I do not have the essential skills required for participation	–	0.1

<sup>a</sup>Percentage %.

owners of SMEs generally have a more precarious labor market position compared to private sector employees and even more of course in comparison to public servants.

Moreover, data of Table 6 show that the level of employment *security* is related to participation. In fact the more secure the job position, the more involved the individual is in adult education programs. Especially in the case of unemployed the gap between *insiders* and *outsiders* of the labor market tends to widen during the economic crisis. Specifically, the unemployed who need education the most in order to find a position in the labor market have a participation rate three to five times lower than those who are employed. We note that a previous research that took place during the same period and concerned learners' dropout from programs showed that the structure of the dropout has similar features with that of non-participation presented in the research herein (Koutouzis, 2013).



**Table 6.** Inequalities in participation.

Ratios	2011	2013
Gender		
Male/female	1.23	0.99 <sup>a</sup>
Income		
Adequate/ inadequate	1.84	1.50
Occupational status		
Public servants/employees of private sector	n/a	1.55
Public servants/self-employed and owners of SMEs	n/a	1.80
Public servants/unemployed	n/a	4.90
Employees of private sector/self-employed and owners of SMEs	1.45	1.16
Employees of private sector/unemployed	2.67	3.16
Self-employed and owners of SMEs/unemployed	1.85	2.74
Education		
Tertiary/primary education	2.73	7.93
Tertiary/secondary education	1.71	2.76

SME: Small Medium Enterprise.

<sup>a</sup>Ratios.

## Discussion

Studying the participation rates in Greece from a historical perspective, it seems that the course of adult education in the last 35 years is extremely impressive. According to an approximate calculation, given that there were no similar studies for participation in the 1980s, the participation rate in 1980 was between 1 and 2% (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004), while based on the data of the second phase of the research presented in this article the most recent percentage reached 30%. Therefore, the progress made is very important and Greece is probably the only developed country with such an increase in participation rates. We point to the fact that in the literature it is cited as particularly striking that Finland doubled its rates in 20 years, from 1980 to 2000 (UNESCO, 2010, p. 65).

We believe that this increase can be explained by specific developments in the adult education field, but also by the overall social and economic conditions in Greece as these were described in the first part of the article. The increase of programs offered and the development of a welfare state, due to the social and political events from 1980 to 2010, contributed to the infiltration of institutions of adult education and the development of positive dispositions of citizens regarding participation. During that period serious advances were occurred, such as the subsidies for participation, the creation of children day care units, enhancement of adult education provision (accredited organizations and accredited educators). Thus, the increase of participation rates on a long-term basis may be explained

according to the Bounded Agency Model since the developments mentioned constitute *broad structural conditions* and *targeted policy measures* that cause *conditioning of values and perspectives* (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 195).

However, during the period covered by this research (2011–2013), the increase in participation rates may be considered as a paradox, given that in conditions of an unprecedented and extremely severe economic crisis, participation rates are clearly rising. Two elements could explain this increase: the first is that during that period leverage in offered programs is observed as the State financed a lot of programs through the European Structural Funds, while at the same time in the municipalities of the country, Centers of Lifelong Learning are established, oriented to general adult education. The second element that may explain the increase in participation rates is the perceptions of the citizens regarding the role of adult education detected in the qualitative part of this study. Based on these we can reasonably assume that the people involved in programs wish to increase their knowledge and skills in times of economic crisis. Another aspect that should be discussed is Greece's position regarding other European countries in terms of participation rates. According to the data from Eurostat studies, despite the fact that they are not directly comparable to the data of this study—as Eurostat examines data collected on a monthly basis as opposed the present research that is conducted on an annual basis—Greece seems to be in a disadvantaged position in comparison to the other EU Member States during the economic crisis.

Regarding the reasons and barriers to participation, based on the evidence that was mentioned, it results that the general picture is to a large extent the same between the two phases of the research. As for the reasons of participation, comparing the findings of the two research phases we reach the conclusion that the highest acceptance is recorded for the reasons that are included in the categories “professional advancement” and “cognitive interest” (Table 2). When the participants had the possibility of selecting all the reasons for participation, the option “because I like to learn new things” reaches approximately 90%, while between the factors of the “professional advancement” category the most popular is *efficiency at work*, followed by keeping the job or finding a new one (Table 3). The acquisition of formal qualifications is to be found in the middle of preferences (when all reasons can be selected) or at the end (when there is the option of selecting only one). Reasons that include the teams “personal/family life” and “social relationships” are selected the least. Therefore, we consider that the prevailing form of the interpretation of participation is the path “I like to learn, I participate in a program, I am more efficient at my work,” as opposed to “I participate for the certificate, I increase my formal qualifications, I maintain (or claim) a (better) job.”

As for the barriers to participation, the most significant is the cost—it is selected by eight out of 10 persons—a fact obviously connected to the consequences of the economic crisis. As a result, citizens are not in the position to self-finance their education or even participate in offered programs. The lack of information is the second stated reason, when the option of three choices is given, while once again it

is found in the top of preferences when the option of only one choice is given. The lack of time because of professional obligations and caring of children are the two next most popular reasons, following the cost of participation when one barrier is chosen. Lack of time because of children care concerns to a much higher degree women, while the lack of time because of professional obligations mostly concerns the self-employed as opposed to employees of the private sector. The barriers connected to the organizational conditions of programs are mentioned to a smaller extent, in comparison to the above-mentioned reasons. When the participants were asked to choose all the reasons that influenced them, the first 10 barriers can be included in the group of structural barriers according to Rubenson–Desjardins typology, while seven factors are included in the organizational barriers and three in the situational barriers according to Cross typology. Respectively, the dispositional barriers rank quite low, a fact that strengthens the conclusion we mentioned in the analysis, that of positive predispositions of citizens toward education. We consider this remark as of high significance because structural or organizational and situational barriers could be a matter of policy interventions which could lead rapidly to an increase in participation rates at least compared to dispositional ones.

## Conclusions

Despite the fact that European and national agencies conduct researches periodically regarding participation in Greece, the research presented in this article is the first where participation is monitored on an annual basis, while the reasons and barriers to participation survey are based on a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach. The conduct of the two phases of the survey coincided with the peak of the consequences of the economic crisis in Greece, which as mentioned have dramatic consequences in the deterioration of living standards for the majority of citizens.

What results from the research data presented in this article, but also from comparison to data of other researches and to historical evidence, is precisely what the title of this article is aiming to capture. A series of changes in social and economic conditions during the last 35 years resulted in a unique increase in the participation of citizens in adult education in Greece, despite the fact that the country ranks at the bottom among European countries based on longitudinal measurements for participation. According to the survey data, during the crisis participation rates are increasing, mainly due to State intervention and leverage. However, the gap with other European countries continues to grow along with inequalities in participation, especially regarding the educational level and employment security. Therefore, the stabilization of growth trends in participation and the reduction of access inequalities in adult education in Greece are influenced by the economic crisis and now seems as if shooting a moving target. In the country he was born, Sisyphus has to carry the boulder up the hill hoping that this will not last forever.

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