



## **A Mixed-Methods Study of Educational Persistence among Greek Undergraduate Students in Lesvos, Greece**

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30 June 2024

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my mother, who has always believed in me - always. Thank you to all my friends, family, colleagues, and loved ones who have stood by me through this master's program journey. I have always been blessed by the opportunities that education has provided me and the many pathways and people that it has brought me. It is in honor of every door that has opened up because of education that I have been able to pursue this work.

I thank my supervisor, Thanasis Kizos, for his never-ending support, compassion, and guidance through this process. Our twice weekly meetings, endless brainstorming sessions, many coffees, and words of affirmation kept my belief in this work alive, and I look forward to many more days and nights in the incredible city of Mytilini.

Thank you to my dearest thesis cohort. Without this bond we've shared in these last months, I don't know where this work may have landed. Sincerely, I owe an endless gratitude to our laughs, griefs, frustrations, and triumphs together. Gabriel, Sarita, Luka, Nadia, and Minh. I'm grateful for our days together and for when our lives bring us back together.

To the rest of our cohort in the Islands Program - I would have never made it this far without each and every one of you. Likewise, I hope that our paths will continue to cross in the infinite archipelago of life.

Lastly, to my new friends studying at the University of the Aegean, your stories filled me with hope and wonder and kept my spirits burning bright. May this work bring some light as you complete your island university journeys.

**Abstract:**

This research explores transformational experiences of Greek students studying at the University of the Aegean in Lesvos. In Greece, national panhellenic exam results determine what universities students can attend; social pressures and educational expectations factor in the ultimate selection process, leading students to study in Lesvos under tenuous conceptions of choice. Through a critical realist lens, this research employs two mixed methods: semi-structured interviews and survival analysis. Persistence factors are studied to reveal how islandness can shape student experiences and outcomes. Ultimately, this work argues that unique spatial and temporal dimensions of studying in an island provide an unexpected transformative experience for Greek students which can be utilized to strengthen the student experience. Policy and practice recommendations are formed to address educational disparities in island universities.

**Keywords:** higher education, student transitions, persistence, island studies

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## **2. Introduction**

### **Student Becoming and Persistence**

Universities are spaces where young people initiate, and sometimes complete, a process of becoming. Transitioning from high school to university is a process fraught with emotion, discourse, and hope that the next stage in a student's education journey will amount to all of the meaning attached to university as an achievement. Transitions as processes of becoming (Gravett 2019) encompass one way of understanding how this period in a young person's life can allow them to renegotiate their identity, sense of community, sense of home, and their sense of the future. Transition as becoming can also mean transition as un-becoming as well - identity, community, home, and the future can be lost in this process of navigating life as an emerging adult. The process of managing this transition can be understood by the higher education concept of persistence. For some, persistence can mean moving from one institution to another, in other definitions, persistence can be defined as certain credits, hours, or courses which allow a student to pass from one year in a degree to the next. Among many definitions, one understanding of educational persistence is "the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginner year through degree completion" (Berger and Lyon 2005).

Using Berger and Lyon's definition, understanding persistence as a desire and action invoke a student's agency in their ability to persist, heading toward the final act of graduating. Persistence is important as a proxy for understanding whether a student is making steps forward in their life in this process of becoming. For students that stumble or stagnate in this stage, which can be understood as a stage within temporal and spatial dimensions, they

may take on the moniker of the perpetual student, someone who never completes their degree and never completes this particular pathway of becoming.

What shapes the higher education experience so that some students persist and others do not? This research examines how the experience of persistence manifests both as an individual assemblage of qualities that a student embodies during this time in their life as well as a reaction to the circumstances, context, and place in which a student persists. If a place can become the stage in which this process of belonging takes place, how do students navigate place to “become,” and, in turn, how can place shape the becoming of a student?

To examine the curious case of place and space in conversations on education persistence, an island setting may prove to provide a fruitful case study. As a location set by spatial boundaries and yet ever networked to the rest of the world regardless of bounds, islands can be perfect places to examine what can become of a young person during this experience. Beyond typical connections and being rooted in a specific locality, islands are unique spaces. Therefore, what can studying the experience of students persisting in such a specific spatial context provide to the understanding of persistence in and of itself? How do space and place become environments through which, by which, and against which students will reach their goals of becoming by persisting in a higher education pathway?

### **Why Islands?**

In the imaginations about islands, islands have always been seen through a multiple of lens - on their remoteness, connectedness, distance, freedom, and so forth. Under such different literacy and cultural tropes, distinctly defining what makes an island an island can be difficult, and defining islandness (Foley et al. 2023) proves to be a case of prioritizing size, culture, identity, or another marker to prove that an island is an island and not some other kind of territory. Though islands may remain elusive in strict definitions, how people

understand islands, though culturally-bound symbols of meaning, are just as important as the physical entities of small lands bound by sea and provide meaning to these tropes of remoteness, connectedness, distance, freedom. In early island studies, islands were seen as natural laboratories, especially in regards to studying tourism and the allure of the island destination (Hall 2015, p.177). As bounded territories, sometimes, islands were taken to be knowable sites, places in which one could discover and imagine having discovered its entirety during a holiday. Scholars, meanwhile, also imagine islands as “experimental, extreme, or frontline sites” (Baldacchino 2010, p. 167) for which many scholars seek to break new ideological ground, as a newer field of geography with growing attention to the ways that the experience of an island is different than other territories.

Yet, this compulsion to seeing islands as novel spaces must be contested as much as it is invoked. In seeing islands as new places, even for scientific inquiry, we are reminded to ask the question - new for whom? A hegemonic reproduction of colonial mindsets can be common in island studies as island scholars are not necessarily islanders themselves. To represent the experiences of islands and islanders, it is imperative in the field to embody a ethics of decoloniality when possible (Nimführ and Meloni 2021). Considering islands to be remote is political, not natural. Though bounded by water, the remoteness of an island is produced by asymmetries of power which "structures the positioning and experiencing of time and place" (Ronström 2021, p.1) and maintains a center-periphery structure between the island and what structure or structures govern the island. One can be reminded, instead, that instead of insisting that islands are cut off from beyond the island, their borders are instead porous in nature, and porous of the islander who is able to “conceptualize, embody and transmit alternative imaginaries” (Kallis et al. 2022, p.9). The imagination, and narratives, of an island belong to islanders and those invested in the island by means other than a lifelong residency. Plainly put, islands are complex, fascinating spaces which elude easy

characterization or definition, and by observing human experiences in such global yet local spaces, there can be much to be gleaned from the way that locality and spatiality can interact with a person's development.

### **Why Island Universities?**

It is in this tension of who, what, and for whom islands simply are that can develop conversations of the island as a transitory place for where young people can become. An island university is a place at the center of these tensions, sitting at a political interstice of domains, environments, and political geographies which overlap, intermingle, and converse in meaning-bound space (Kelman 2022). Despite an imagined separation between communities beyond the island, islands and their universities can also be deeply intertwined with other universities, other islands, and other mainlands, in an effort to network without the aid of physical connection of a land bridge. Some scholarship has emerged on the specificities of universities on small island states and their productive roles in reshaping dynamics of brain rotation and brain drain (Baldacchino 2006; Baldacchino 2024), able to draw students from within and beyond the nation and thus providing opportunities to capture educated young people who might otherwise flee for opportunities elsewhere.

The ability to reshape brain drain within a geographic region provides an interesting case for the potential for island universities to serve a young population seeking to develop into adulthood, even if attending an island university comes with additional inherent costs of transportation and residency (Henderson 2021). With archipelagic countries such as Greece who also have been experiencing brain drain and depopulation, this need for island universities to counter brain drain and drive brain rotation becomes even more imperative. As engines of the Greek education system, Greek island universities play important national roles in maintaining the educational and professional development of a young population. At



an individual level, how do students experience the Greek island university and what kinds of meanings do Greek university students themselves uncover about the islands, and the education system, of their own country as they aspire to reach their goals of graduating?

### **Context: Greece and Greek Education**

The specific context of Greece provides an interesting case study to understand the uniqueness of islands as settings for higher education because it is an archipelagic nation rather than a small island state. In general, the Greek education system provides a unique case study for understanding the way a nation attempts to provide equity in managing the learning opportunities of its students across the varied network of geographies in an archipelagic nation setting. Outlined below are the typical stages of a Greek education:

- Students attend primary school in Greece (Δημοτικό, or Demotiko) and then move on to secondary school (Γυμνάσιο, or Gymnasio).
- The last stage before university is a three year high school experience called Λύκειο (Likeio).
- Particularly in the last 1-2 years of Likeio, Greek students seeking to attend university also take on private tutoring after school called Φροντιστήριο, or Frontistirio.
- Participating in these private tutoring classes are more or less mandatory to prepare for the national university entrance exams (which in English are sometimes translated as the Panhellenic Exams). The Πανελλήνιες, or Panellinies, are subject based tests which align with the specialties that a student focused on within their high school curriculum as well as the specific subjects of their private tutoring.

- The points received during the Panhellenies are called μόρια, or moria, which are calculated typically out of 20,000 moria.
- Depending on what students anticipate their moria to be, they develop a list of departments at various universities, in order of ranked preference and what they believe they can obtain based on their practice scores and last year's base entrance score.
- Once Panellinies scores are returned to students, they are able to receive entrance to their highest university for which matches their moria.
- Public universities, in terms of tuition, are free for students.

Many scholars will note that educational choice in the Greek education system, from primary to tertiary levels, is fraught with inequities. Gouvias notes that class privilege often comes into play regarding the preparedness of students during the university selection process. Knowing which curricular tracks to select for the exam, knowledge of φροντιστήριο (private tutoring), and other material and immaterial advantages can be prohibitive knowledge for families depending on social class (Gouvias 1998). Kassotakis and Verdis highlight the phenomenon that frontistirio, or private cram schools, are viewed not as optional but as crucial for students aiming to enter university, with many attributing their successful university entry more to these supplementary academic activities than to their public schooling (Kassotakis and Verdis 2013). University preparation and selection, then, are often coupled with uncertainty and insecurity about the value of a university education, particularly working class Greek students (Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides 2011). Instead, educational and work opportunities are often imagined in Athens, or at times Thessaloniki, leading students to mobilize their efforts in envisioning their student careers in such places (Psycharis, Tselios, and Pantazis 2019). Even for students who do attend university, Katsikas

has noted that, in 2010, less than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all Greek university students completed their degrees on time, ultimately impacting the success of students as degree completion time has been correlated to higher academic achievement as well (Katsikas 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Given the way that Greek young people select universities through a matching of programs of interest with the moria of their Panellinies scores, the concept of educational choice becomes unique in the Greek context. When attending an island university is more expensive for the majority of Greeks who reside on the mainland, who comes to an island university and why? On the island of Lesvos resides six departments of the University of the Aegean system, a university system composed of a number of island locations spread across the Aegean Sea. Located at the edge of Greece and separated by distance and water, the island of Lesvos might not hold the same fantasy for young Greek students that draw students to places like Athens and Thessaloniki, cities at the center of social and economic opportunities within the country. Understanding what draws local and non-local students to the island, and what drives them to continue their studies on the island, is the subject of interest for this research. Using the University of the Aegean in Lesvos as a case study, this research aims to tackle educational equity within Greece, and understand how students choose to come to this island (whether by choice at all), and how the process of acclimating to the island presents their own meanings specific to such a locality as the University of the Aegean in Lesvos.

**Research Question:**

How does studying at an island university affect the experience of persistence for Greek students?

In the process of untangling the social meanings that students develop in their undergraduate studies on the island, this research provides an opportunity to underscore several themes which interplay with one another, namely, the life course of educational motivation, student transitions and personal growth, and the role of spatiality in educational experiences. To this end, three sub-questions have been developed in addition:

**Sub-Question 1 on the life course of educational motivation:**

How have changes over the course of a Greek student's life impacted their educational motivation?

**Sub-Question 2 on student transitions and personal growth:**

What challenges or enables a Greek student to navigate the transitional period between high school and university?

**Sub-Question 3 on spatiality in educational experiences:**

What meanings do students derive from their experience of studying on the island?

Sub-Question 1 addresses the development of educational motivation over the life course, leading up to (re)conceptualizations of educational choice during a student's experiences at an island university. Sub-Question 2 addresses student transition to university and what enabling and challenging factors shape the experience of that transition.

Sub-Question 3 addresses how students conceptualize experiences on the island as meaningful, particular both to the island as a space and particular to their time on the island as a moment in their lives as students. Together, in understanding the experiences of students through the lens created by the three sub-questions, this work aims to answer how the island university experience impacts, shapes, and otherwise affects whether Greek students persist in their academic degrees.

Ultimately, this work seeks to illuminate a knowledge gap in the field, particularly how experiences of spatiality can affect higher education persistence and how meaning is derived by students in their spatial experiences which have consequences for their ability to navigate life, either through the rest of their degree, or how they formulate potential pathways for the rest of their lives after graduation. Greek students persist under the particular social conditions of living and developing as young adults in their country of origin, and it is through this work that this research may contribute to scholarship surrounding persistence in international higher education as well as provide policy and practice recommendations specific to the University of the Aegean which address the challenges, concerns, and frustrations which arise from conducting this research and learning more about the lives of Greek island university students.

### **3. Research Paradigm**

#### **Interpretivism and Critical Realism**

The aim of this research studies the dynamic lives of Greek students studying at an island university as told from the perspectives of the Greek university students themselves. To understand how students perceive the impact of studying on the island, it is necessary to approach the study with openness to each student's unique experience, centering the subjectivity of their experiences to create valid knowledge. Telling the stories of this community from within requires an emic perspective. The interpretation of data will occur on multiple levels: first, students will interpret their own experiences for themselves and for the researcher, and second, as a researcher, their stories will be used to interpret the data for an academic audience.

Using a relativist ontology, assuming multiple realities within a research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2017) with a particular interpretivist lens, this research operates with the understanding that "reality is socially constructed as people's experiences occur within social, cultural, historical or personal contexts" (Hennink et al. 2010, p.15). An interpretivist lens will study subjectivities that people recognize within their life experiences and how these subjectivities will create multiple interpretations of realities in the plural. Through interpretivism, this research seeks to honor the narratives of research participants by authentically representing their real lives and conveying the validity of their experiences on the island.

Interpretation of the data lies in both the methodology and philosophy behind the analytical tools used to process the data. For research methodology, qualitative methods are appropriate as an interpretivist interpretation of student experiences is the goal. Specifically,

semi-structured interviews will be utilized in order to elicit experiences from students so that students can co-created their narratives along with the researcher.

However, this research does not only seek to understand the experiences of students, but also to provide recommendations for education policymakers and practitioners tasked with educating students. To do so, a triangulation of methods will be employed, and specifically, quantifiable insights will also be used in tandem with student insights in order to both validate themes and provide a descriptive analysis of historical trends in student outcomes.

With trepidation, scholars can find the difficulties of mixing methods often lies in presenting findings in parallel with very little mixing due to a lack of exemplars with true mixing. Instead, outcomes seem to justify mixing methods rather than rationale (Bryman 2008). To the benefit of utilizing mixed methods, Iosifidis notes that "...it is impossible to mix positivist with interpretivist or constructionist assumptions without avoiding serious problems in explanatory power" though mixing methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, are highly desirable "as an important condition for successful investigation of complex problems and realities" (2017, p. 10). Lastly, within education research, there is precedence in understanding the value of mixing methods for the benefit of student outcomes. In education research, mixed methodologies have been employed largely in two sequences: firstly, through quantitative analysis at first, which is validated by qualitative research for depth, or secondly, qualitative as the primary research method, with quantitative validation (Ponce and Maldonado 2014).

Another paradigm, then, is used as an analytical bridge between the subjective realities of the student experience with the (seemingly) exact and definitive nature of quantitative methods. Critical realism acknowledges the human subjective experiences observed through interpretivism while acknowledging social structures which either enable or

constraint agents from interacting within their context. Within a critical realist perspective, quantitative data can very willingly be used by researchers to verify qualitative findings, to which traditional interpretivist perspectives may be hesitant. Similarly, the weaknesses of a positivist paradigm would fail to understand the importance of the complexity of social context under which outcomes occur and only observe social phenomena in isolation (McEnvoy and Richards 2006).

Bhakar developed critical realism as a way to make sense of the endeavor of science beyond and past positivist reasoning. Through realism, "perception gives us access to things and experimental activity access to structures that exist independently of us," and through critical realism, the nature of causal laws as "expressing tendencies of things, not conjunctions of events" (Bhakar 2008, p. xxx-xxx). Critical Realism denotes that reality is socially constructed yet agents are still bounded by social structures. Though the complexity of human behaviors, outcomes, and events cannot be attributed solely to structural factors, as is in a positivist paradigm, within critical realism, there is an acknowledgement that individual actions do not happen in a vacuum. Thus, in an effort to make the best of two perspectives, critical realism frames the choice of perspectives used to understand this research and how to analyze the findings for a particular action research outcome.



#### 4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research draws specifically from research on Student Transitions, which describes the sociocultural contexts and adolescent development that occurs when high school students transition into university. Transition is key to understanding that moving from one stage of education to another is a process which is highly embedded in social meaning. Chow and Healey argue that transition can signify both a loss of place and a sense of belonging, as notions of home become confounded for students attending university for the first time, now seeing themselves caught between two senses of home, though feeling complete in neither of them during this transition period (Chow and Healey 2008). They observe that participants face a pivotal moment between their previous understanding and feeling of home and the process of creating a new home at university, often their first experience away from home. This transition signifies a disruption in their sense of place. The expectation that home would remain unchanged after leaving is challenged and altered during the study period. New conceptions of home emerge from interactions among people and the relationships between people and their new environment.

In student transition literature, there is a new demand to recognize the complexity of student life as student transition is a process of becoming. As Gale and Parker note: "If education systems, structures, institutions and procedures do not take account of the multiplicities of student lives that enter HE [higher education], then transition practices will be less effective" (2012, p. 745). The multiplicity of student lives is a development in student transition literature in that there are calls for recognition that transition, despite its seeming singularity, is an iterative, transformative, and dynamic process. Gale and Parker argue that "the normative and the universal discourses of transition do not capture the diversity of student lives, their experiences of university or of universities themselves" (2012, 745), acknowledging that institutions as spaces of transition(s) are dynamic entities unto

themselves. It is under this conception of the imprecise nature of student transition and mobility that needs to be conceptualized for its dynamism, in that mobility is often not linear and that the reconceptualization of self is never fully transformative towards one direction: "students' mobilities and transitions can be understood as more complex, fluid, messy, uncertain and rhizomatic, than normative depictions of the journey from home to university would suggest" (Balloo et al. 2021, p. 1033).

To this multifaceted, multidimensional, complex assemblage of processes that student transition can be embedded in, Hordósy attempts to outline four dimensions of university transition: horizontal, vertical, agential, and structural dimensions (2021). To paraphrase further, she argues that student transitions can encompass non-linearity as processes across time (the horizontal dimension), multidimensionality in a student becoming capable of producing knowledge themselves (the vertical dimension), reflexivity and able to produce action within that reflexive experience (an agential dimension), and a structurally embedded dimension within which each student embodies and is inscribed within multiple social roles. The four-structured dimensionality of Hordósy's understanding of student transition provides insight to a similar framing of persistence. Roland et al have also outlined a concise categorization of values which indicate student persistence: "interest, self-confidence (which can also be considered as self-efficacy), social integration and social support" (2016, p.183), though they note that students may not have these in equal value and will compensate for one another.

Thus, in an attempt to understand Hordósy and Roland et al. in tandem with one another to create an appropriate framework for thinking through how the multiple dimensions surrounding student transition will inform the values that drive student persistence, the research sub-questions were formed to highlight similar areas of inquiry, namely:

- 1) how educational motivation changes over the life course,

- 2) how student transitions and personal growth are interrelated, and
- 3) how island spatiality influences education experiences.

Together, the insights from these three analytical categories also form the basis for deduction in that they will provide some of the framing of the student experiences.

## **5. Methodology**

### **Research Timeline**

Preparation for this work roughly began in November 2023 and went through February 2024 and was developed during the Research Process and Proposal Writing course. During that time, the subject of interest was the drivers of enrollment toward the University of the Aegean. However, this research has proven to be an iterative process, especially more context about Greek Higher Education, private tutoring, the Panhellenic Exams, and the moria system became relevant through conversations with my supervisor. Thus, the actual research question was developed and changed throughout this process and iteratively through these early months of 2024 as did the sub-questions. After initial developments of an interview guide, submission and acceptance by the ethics committee, data collection began in March and continued through the end of April. Once collection was complete, data processing was completed during the months of April and May as well as drafting of the report, which was completed in June 2024.

### **Methodology & Data Collection**

#### **Qualitative Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews**

The primary mode of data collection for this research is semi-structured interviews and the secondary data source was university enrollment, transfer, and graduation data. In order to conduct qualitative data collection, an interview guide was developed which aligned with the theoretical framework and literature review conducted prior to entering the field. Community access was mediated by a number of factors. Firstly, I, the researcher, am also currently a postgraduate student at the University of the Aegean and I am conducting research in the community after having been part of the student community for one semester the year prior. Though this concept of community is not homogenous, it did mean that I did have some

knowledge of certain students, which also helped for snowball sampling for some additional participants.

However, snowball sampling did fall short after the first 6 interviews. Data collection came at a certain point during the semester in which students were conducting protests, both vacating the campus and overtaking academic buildings in order to demonstrate. This paucity of students on campus allowed for greater interaction between the researcher and a number of participants who stayed on campus in order to participate with the demonstration. This also meant, however, that there were less students to interact with from my immediate network of informants. A large portion of recruitment also came from the aid of department heads and their secretaries, who were to identify a number of students in their classes or allow the researcher to come and recruit from the classes.

All together, this led to a total of 29 interviews being conducted during the data collection process, of which, students were spread across departments, mixed gender (male, female, and nonbinary), mixed age, mixed cohort years, and from different parts of Greece as well; all of this was in the hopes that the data collected would be from unique individuals with stories to tell and who could speak to the complex and diverse experiences of Greek students at the university.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis: Inductive Analysis**

The aim of inductive content analysis is producing "abstracts of the raw data that summarise the main categories, concepts and themes, and provide indications of potential theoretical relationships" (Kyngäs 2020, p. 14). Inductive analysis is well equipped to move data from loosely constructed categories into workable data abstractions, which may be needed due to the openness of the research questions. This work does not contest any "widely accepted interpretation or model" and instead qualifies the validity of its results by "starting

from the data itself" (Vears and Gillam 2022, p.115). This research explores student experiences in higher education through grounded theory. Though there is going to be broad themes from the literature which are more likely than not going to be present in the data collected, as will be discussed in the upcoming theoretical framework section, what is going to be important to this research is the ability to draw theory from the data itself - what is known as grounded theory, or as Hennink et al. refer to it, ""theorizing as you go" (2010, p.211).

This will be important in understanding persistence in a Greek education context as many persistence models have been built around the education systems of the USA and UK. Building out this research through grounded theory serves a decolonial purpose within island studies, and work on persistence and spatiality within student transition requires ways of thinking possible through inductive analysis (Nimführ and Otto 2020). Nadarajah et al argue that too much of island scholarship has been done by non-islanders to say something about islanders, much in parallel to colonial literature. Instead, they argue, that we ought to develop a "reflexive interrogation of our own positionalities as island studies scholars" so that we remain intimately aware of "the necessity of unlearning our own privilege and power as they relate to knowledge production"" (2022, p. 16-17)". To this end, inductive coding can provide more space for participants to speak and be heard by their terms.

### **Quantitative Data Collection: Student Enrollment Records**

As discussed within the research paradigm section of this paper, a mixed methods approach was chosen to understand structural outcomes as well as individual experiences. Quantitative data collected for this study came from university databases holding student information on enrollment, transfer, and graduation. Access to these data was provided by department secretaries for each of the 6 departments on Lesbos: Geography, Social

Anthropology & History, Oceanography & Marine Sciences, Environmental Science, Sociology, and Cultural Technology.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis: Survival Analysis**

In selecting the appropriate kind of analysis for this data, survival analysis was chosen in order to understand macro trends across student populations. The potential for survival analysis to uncover demographic factors in withdrawal rates inspires the quantitative portion of this study, as Martínez-Carrascal et al. "remark on the potential of survival analysis to detect situations that would otherwise remain hidden" (2023, p. 16).

Survival analysis, while originating in public health to determine the likelihood of mortality after a patient is diagnosed with a particular disease, proved to be a useful analytical tool for educational records as well, with a history in its various applications. For instance, in an Indiana charter school system, survival analysis has been used to understand attrition factors (Finch et al. 2009), in another instance, it has linked study timing and outcome attainment by a community college cohort (Mourad 2008), and it has been used to correlate high school testing scores with persistence in college across genders (Chimka and Lowe 2008). In essence, survival analysis helps to understand the turning points across a chronology in which the risk of mortality will sharply decline. Thus, in the context of student enrollment records, it was used to plot out the likelihood of students obtaining graduation status across the course of a number of semesters.

Critical realism, as has been stated, acknowledges that human subjected experiences and agency exist within social structures which can be negotiated, but ultimately are the enabling social force which allows agents to navigate within. The insights of survival analysis were utilized in tandem with qualitative insights in order to provide stronger policy recommendations; as an example from the literature, utilizing observed attrition rates of a

university in Ohio, researchers provided policy recommendations which strengthened the 1st year experience for students from out of student as well as minority backgrounds (Murtaugh et al. 1999). Similar kinds of recommendations emerged from the dual analysis of both qualitative and quantitative insights.

### **Data Management**

Data management practices were aligned to standards adhered to by both the University of the Aegean and the University of Groningen. Qualitative data collected from the interviews included audio recordings. These audio files would be moved from the recording device, in this case the cell phones of the researcher, immediately preceding the interviews onto virtual, password protected, cloud secured file storage and then deleted off the original recording devices within a day. To convert audio files into transcripts, this process was aided by the AI transcription software Descript, which was explained to participants during the signing of the content forms. Descript works to secure data in two ways: the program securely transfers data through HTTPS, which is industry-standard security for data transmission, and while the software is not transmitting data, it is stored in an encrypted database. In either state, the data is not accessible by the Descript company itself and remains confidential throughout its storage. Once transcribed through the program, participant names were removed from any transcriptions. One month after submission of this report, all audio and transcription will be stored in a new encrypted storage system in the case of future analysis.

In terms of quantitative data storage, data drawn from the department level of student enrollment records had personalized data, such as name and student ID, removed from the workable spreadsheets. These spreadsheets were transferred securely to a physical computer in the university' postgraduate laboratory. The files were secured behind password protected



accounts and the laboratory itself is protected by a lock which only postgraduate students in the university have access to.

### **Positionality**

Mixed methodologies of both semi-structured interviews and survival analysis were used in tandem to understand the individual and collective experiences of student persistence. Mixed methods are possible on the island and triangulation can be very important for understanding an issue from different angles, but it may require insider privileges, as Agius notes (2022), in order to facilitate entering the world of islanders from a non-island vantage point. As will be discussed, accessing both students and university records was made possible through the support of university department heads, which also provided some legitimacy to the research as it seemed vetted by an administrative figure. For qualitative data collection, this required some navigation in terms of positionality to level the power dynamics of interviews; for quantitative data collection, this meant that framing the data requests were necessary to dissuade any hesitations regarding misuse of student data.

Adriansen & Madsen (2014) argue the importance for geographers to understand the spatialized dynamics of power when conducting interviews with students. Recommended are four key considerations for conducting student interviews: attention to positionality, attention to power relations, visual co-construction during the interview, and awareness of insider-outsider position. As an Erasmus student who many times has been older than my participants and who speaks English natively, I aimed to develop a space for semi-structured interviews which accounted for these components of power.

Understanding student experiences from the students themselves approaches the research with as much of an emic perspective as possible. Though I myself may not be an undergraduate Greek student at the university, I at least try to engage myself in the

community, understand their experiences through their narrative and lens, and work to take on as much of an insider's perspective as possible, knowing that this is a goal and not a full reality. As a qualitative researcher, it is essential to recognize both the value and potential harm an outsider's perspective can bring to the community being studied. Narratives can shape perceptions positively or negatively. Scholars studying islands often discuss who has the right to speak for islanders and why (Nadarajah et al. 2022). As a non-Greek foreigner from a middle class background and who pursued specific educational and professional goals, I understand that my positionality affects my actions, behaviors, and values.

These aspects of my identity shape what I deem important to study, and as an outsider to the community of Lesbos, I must be particularly cautious not to overstep in terms of my data collection behavior, analysis, or reporting. Positionality is critical not only for gaining participants' trust but also for ensuring the validity of my research findings. My personal biases can influence data analysis, and while some biases can be mitigated with foresight and caution, others happen due to the nature of research with human subjects. It is vital to amplify my participants' voices, allowing them to represent their personal and collective experiences. For instance, students might often ask me what my perspective is on the education system, whether I agree or disagree in its quality, based on what I've gathered; though rapport building is important as well as honesty with my participants, I intended to answer these questions with an openness to wanting to understand what does work in the system for Greek students and withhold my judgments when possible. When judgments seemed appropriate, I also asked participants to consider how I formed my judgments, and also recognize that my judgments are not neutral and are the result of systems which I grew up in and initiated my own process of becoming.

Regarding my research methods and inherent biases, transparency is crucial. My research will be conducted in English, including the literature I review and the interviews I

conduct. This means that the knowledge I acquire will be filtered through my native language rather than the native language of the people I am studying. My participants will need to communicate in a language that is not their own, and while some may be fluent, they may not express themselves as fully as they would in their native language. Language will influence my sampling, and students more proficient in English will likely have different perspectives than those less proficient and will be more likely to share about themselves. This I should be made aware of while seeking to represent the experiences of these students.

As a non-Greek researcher, I also understand what my strengths are in conducting this research. Educational choice was one of the most profound experiences which shaped my life. At the end of high school, I decided not to attend university in my hometown and instead chose a smaller university elsewhere. The ability to study in a new environment provided me with a transformational experience that I couldn't imagine would have been possible if I stayed in my hometown. This university experience directly led to my first work roles outside of university, research opportunities, and networking opportunities which eventually led me to working in program management in the same public education system which I attended as a child. Thus, my ability to reflect on the importance of education and how it can shape the life course of a young person is directly linked to my own parallel experiences of undertaking the decision to attend university, just like the participants of this study.

### **Ethics Considerations**

A research proposal and certain research materials, such as an interview guide and consent form, were submitted to the ethics committee at the University of the Aegean and approval was received before any data was collected. Before any interviews were conducted with willing participants, a consent form was shared either in-person or digitally prior to the

interview, explained in-person, signed by the participant, and then kept in a secure physical storage.

In addition, a kind of ethical consideration also emerged which intersects with positionality and data collection which is unique to the kinds of participants and community associated with this research. Erika Hayfield remarks on the importance of understanding a kind of ethics that emerges in small communities like island communities (2022). For Hayfield, it is important that the researcher goes beyond procedural ethics in pursuit of an intimacy relevant to the island community. In this regard, I aimed to explain to allow the participants to co-create the interview stage as much as possible - interruptions, pauses, explaining the interviews, moving to informality, setting up expectations for interviewer behavior while allowing an openness for bilateral discussion and rapport, continuing the interviews the next day to continue long and rich discussion were some of ways in which I operated informally, but which yielded more trust and honesty between participants and myself.

## 6. Findings

The findings below are derived from the 29 semi-structured interviews with current University of the Aegean students. As noted in the methodology section, the students are spread across demographics - by gender, place of origin, cohort year, and by department of study. The findings are organized by the chronological journey that current students take within the Greek education system and presented in the following order:

- 1) Educational experiences prior to high school (Λύκειο)
- 2) Educational experiences during the first two years of high school
- 3) Educational experiences during the last year of high school
- 4) Transitioning to university
- 5) The 1st year university experience on the island
- 6) Persisting beyond the first year

Through each of these stages, commonalities and contradictions will be shared in order to accurately represent the diversity in experiences of Greek students during their educational journeys.

### 1) Educational Experience Prior to High School

Among my participants, there was a consensus that generally, the experience in high school and the experience in primary and secondary school were vastly different. The majority of students who were interviewed spoke about the joy and freedom that they experienced in the earlier years of school, but as studies became “more serious” in secondary school, there is less of a focus on the love of learning for learning’s sake.

*“I liked school. In primary, I think it was one of the best years of my life. Too much freedom, you know? Then, when we got to secondary...then it was really hard because it was a different system.”*

This palpable shift in the student learning experience is also characterized by subjects to which students gravitated toward in their early years. Experiences with subjects in these early subjects play a formative role in what students are already considering to focus on in high school, which eventually will lead to what they will be allowed to apply to study in university. Even at young ages, there is already an expectation that university will happen someday, as many parents did not have the opportunity to attend university during their generation. As one student noted, there was never one explicit conversation about attending university:

*“Yes, they did expect me to do it for sure. When you grow up...because this is a very interesting question that you said right now, that they expected me to do it, and as an adult, I have realized that it was expected of me to pass in the university type of education, which...it's not something that maybe I wouldn't have done by myself, but when you come from a poor environment, it's just a straight road.”*

## **2) During High School**

After the first year of high school, students begin to specialize in a particular track, either studying the humanities or science/health studies; due to the nature of the particular programs at the University of the Aegean, none of the students typically study on the economics and computer science track. Students recognize very formative teachers during this time while other students recognize teachers that were simply there to collect a check.

*“The teachers, they really want to take their money. And they don’t care if you understand or not. They just want their money. And, of course, there are teachers that care. But there are few. The most of them, I think, that is the problem, that they don’t care. They want to just work for a few hours, then go to their home and that’s it. They don’t care about their students. They don’t care about how they are doing. They don’t care to create a relationship with them, so we don’t bond with them. So, they are just distant.”*

At various times, but perhaps most often starting in Y2, students will start taking private tutoring lessons, and for private tutoring taken during high school, these courses will align with the 4 compulsory subjects that students need to pass to make a satisfactory score to make it to a satisfactory university. This is rarely negotiated. Parents already expect their children to go to university in order to have better lives than them and so they also expect them to take these lessons which everyone else is taking.

### **3) Last Year of High School**

Students take the Panhellenic Exams at the end of their senior year. There is a growing juxtaposition between regular school and private tutoring as private school becomes more and more intensive the activities that will prepare you for the Panhellenic exams and thus require more devoted attention. This is often called by most students to be the worst year of their lives. Activities are eschewed, friendships are put on hold, and students can even stop attending the main high school in order to focus on these exams

*“For Panellinies, it’s more like, you study really hard, you have to organize your time. All you do is study. You get back from school, you study. You go to frontistirio, then you get*

*back from frontistirio and study. That is your life for one year. Up until you take these exams. So, your life depends on these exams. You can't do anything right in this country. So every kid that has the money has to go to frontistirio because you can't understand anything. The teachers in our schools can't do their jobs right. They don't care if you don't understand something. They just go into class, they say their things, and then they go out. So, if you don't understand anything, it's up to you. So you have to go to frontistirio because the teachers there really help you."*

Despite the difficulties, students understand that private tutoring is the only way in which they might hope to succeed in the exams:

*"You cannot rely on the education system in Greece, it's not enough. It's not enough at all. And the Panhellenic exams are quite difficult and one of the most pressurized periods of time for every child."*

During this last year, students will engage in their resources: they will ask private tutors, mostly, about university, though school teachers may be knowledgeable as well. Students who are more keen on figuring out their interests will already have begun to see where their practice scores might take them by consulting the AEI TEI website, which lists the passing score of the last student to enter a specific department at a specific university in the previous year. Students will utilize this score to begin gauging their bets for what kinds of programs they will enlist in. During this time, the focus is less about making a path toward your dream school and instead toward success in the Panhellenic exams.



#### 4) Transitioning to University

Students who have already had strong considerations might know exactly which university programs they want to enter. For instance, some students knew right away that they wanted to join the anthropology department because of exposure during high school. Students without such exposure now need to develop the social capital to become aware of their options. With that said, this process is not necessarily a smooth journey. Students may not achieve the moria they would need to get into certain programs of their choosing as anything can happen in the time leading up to and during the exam: a student may have become ill, experience mental health issues, or otherwise feel unprepared to do as well as they would like. If students don't get a satisfactory score, they might even repeat the whole year in private tutoring, either the same or different tutoring, in order to retake the exam. For students who don't make a satisfactory score, they may even enter the workforce or do other programs first, and reapply in a few years. Completing the exams comes with a sense of accomplishment, freedom, and dread. For students whose higher choices on their selection list was the University of the Aegean, the transitioning period is much smoother than students who were accepted to the university, but had aspired to higher ranked programs:

*“There were about 10,000 points. I don't remember. In every one, I was lower than I expected it, and it was lower than I was writing, in both my school and my tutoring classes. So after that, I was kind of shocked. I expected higher, but...after a while, my parents were very nice to me and they were, you know, doing everything they could to make me feel better.”*

Still, due to the nature of the students I spoke with, all students did eventually make the choice to come to the university after some negotiation.

*“At the end of the day, we were like, okay, what are your options? What would you prefer for the first time? It was either I retake those exams, which I did not want to, or choose the school, the university. I did not mind that idea at all.”*

### **5) First Year of Island University**

Coming to the island can be fraught for students. For the majority of students coming from the mainland, if the university was among their preferred choices, the transition is smoother. The opposite holds very true as well: for students who did not prefer to come to Lesvos, this transition can prove to be very difficult. Students in Greece, as it seems, tend to imagine that certain student cities are the most prestigious student cities. Athens in particular, is seen as a city of the “worthy” and that worthy students will pass on to study in Athens.

This may ring particularly true about students who come from Athens, where the majority of the Greek population lives. By studying in Athens, students imagine that they will be studying alongside their peers at prestigious universities and have access to prestigious opportunities. When students, especially Athenian students, do not pass into a university, this can be crushing. They need to negotiate what their hopes and actual opportunities look like. Outside of Athens, Thessaloniki is also a high priority university town for students, and some students also selected Heraklion to be their top choice.

In a similar vein, for students from the island, they can also have the same idea about wanting to study on the mainland out of a desire to leave the smallness of an island. For these students who do end up attending the university here either directly after high school or later in life, they come to make peace with living on the island easier than students from outside the island. There is a greater appreciation for the facets of life on the island and less concern and anxiety about what life and studying in the large universities might be like.

Still for others, the University of the Aegean was their top choice. For instance, there are few programs in Greece which offer Oceanography and Marine Sciences at the undergraduate level and for students who know that they want to study in this field, coming to the university can be exactly what they desire. Others, for instance, knew exactly that geography was what they wanted to pursue and knew of the department's reputation ahead of time. It seems that students with a certain knowledge capital about the university tend to have an easier time acclimating to the first year experience.

In terms of the social life on the island, students typically are, for the first time, away from their friends and family and must learn how to grow as adults in a new context. Most students report that they make many new friends in the first year and that this dwindles down throughout the first year as students no longer feel like they need the safety of a large group.

*“The first friend group I was in was very intense. Very fast, like we connected fast. But...after you pass some of the first difficulties, like every first year student faces, you get to a point that you don't have any common interests and you find your true friends.”*

## **6) Beyond the First Year**

Persisting beyond the first year seems to be a combination of factors. Students who did not select the university as their top choice but continue to stay in the university can have a transformative experience. They are often surprised at the potential for studying at a small institution. Class sizes are smaller and so students can develop stronger relationships with professors as mentors. When reflecting on what the classroom experience might have been like in Athens, students note that the lecture halls might have been full of 200 students without an opportunity to develop close relationships with their lecturers. To provide another brief example of learning opportunities in the university, during the interview, one student

was approached by a professor who reminded him that he needed to sign off from some paperwork on a Hackathon event that he participated in on a different Greek island. The experience of participating in the Hackathon seemed natural, as opportunities happen in the university. Another student remarked that she is participating in another professor's research, outside of the context of a thesis project, simply because she is interested in working more closely on the programming topic.

Another student discussed how he had the opportunity to transfer to another program in Thessaloniki because his grades in the first year were very high.

*“But...I thought to myself that doesn't have point on doing so. I have a degree. I study this degree. And I made very strong connections with the university and with the department, with professors of mine, and I'm really looking forward to escalate and to work with the situation I'm in and to take my degree, to finish my degree.”*

In the end, he decided to stay at the University of the Aegean, for the reasons being that he had already begun to develop a rapport with professors and he came to this university with a goal in mind and he wanted to continue to that goal.

Still not other students find the experience of studying on the island to be as transformative. One student who was interviewed, for instance, did not willingly select the University of the Aegean. He experienced health issues during his last year of high school and had not completed as well as he had expected as he had wanted to attend a medical university either in Athens or in Heraklion. After a semester abroad which was too costly for the family to continue, the student decided to retake the Panhellenic exams, and came to similar scores which did not allow him to pass into his preferred departments. At the highest position on the bottom of his list, he was able to pass into a department at the University of

the Aegean, which he selected on a whim. Despite having a strong first year in the university, the student was still looking to transfer and pursue his interests either in another university or in another country. He found the community of the university to be overwhelming and insular and despite having a good relationship with professors, found that he wasn't building positive relationships with other students like he had hoped.

Navigating the smallness of the island community is key for students who come from outside the island. For one student, she experienced an insular with the island that drove her to seek familiarity back in Athens when possible.

*“So I was alone in my house. I wasn't doing anything. I had to go back to Athens. I was traveling a lot in my second and third year because I was feeling alone.”*

Once being able to make friends, the student was able to more easily navigate life on the island, even in her third and fourth year of university. As her confidence in her friendships grew, so did her ability to focus on her studies, citing that the key to continuing is finding joy in the university studies.

*“I think the secret is to really like what you choose. If you really like it and you're really interested in it, you get to pass a lot of classes and move on in your studies.”*

### **On Motivation, Growth, and Space**

The findings presented align with the temporality of what students experience across the student journey. They invoke the orthodoxy of Greek society in dictating what is right student behavior and expectations happening at the right time in order to yield the right outcomes in life. Yet, they also speak to the complexity of life, and the speed at which these

experiences occur and how these experiences can happen out of step with social orthodoxies. The way that students negotiate the new structures in their lives is both a matter of the structures against which they are defining themselves, and their agency as people to define and redefine these experiences for them.

Taking these experiential findings, we can look at the broader experiences across student interviews to also understand how they address or contest the sub-questions which build an understanding of persistence unique to the experiences of students.

### **Sub-Question 1 on the life course of educational motivation:**

Sub-Question 1: How have changes over the course of a student's life impacted their educational motivation?

A student's first experience of school choice might be the track that students decide to study in high school, which are heavily influenced by what subjects the students cultivated some interest in in primary and secondary school. Outside of choosing a high school track, life until taking the Panhellenic exam is not marked by much school choice. The selection of university is also determined by structural elements and access to certain kinds of knowledge, which can often be parallel to a student's class background. However, in university, students report being able to have more control over their lives, both in their first experiences away from the care of their parents as well as their first experiences being fully in control of their educational choices. Even challenging decisions, such as the decision to pause classes or return home, can reflect a level of agency that students exhibit because they are more fully responsible for themselves, their education, and their relationships. Choosing, and eschewing, a larger friend group in the first year also denotes a kind of quick growth that is possible on the island.

**Sub-Question 2 on student transitions and personal growth:**

Sub-Question 2: What challenges or enables a Greek student to navigate transitions in education?

Enabling and challenger factors during these years of transition for students result from a completely new educational experience. Parents cannot exactly help students navigate this transition, primarily for two reasons: either the student is among the first generation in their family who was able to access higher education, or because living on an island very literally separates parents away so that this period of transition must be navigated by the student alone. Though this period of independence can be challenging, the independence also enables students to experience a dramatic sense of change over their lives:

*“It was actually quite a freeing experience ...my parents were always above me as helicopter parents, I could say, and I felt like I have, for the first time ever, the chance to be a different person, to develop who I am, actually.”*

There is much to be said about the difficulty of transition during this time, and unfortunately it is often described by students as a self-blame for being unable to cope with transition. Students reported facing bullying in the first year coming to the island, even by their own friend group, which then prompted them to seek a new friend group and transition out - or otherwise, face an enormously unsettling situation living in a small community with your bullies. Other students reported feeling a sense of failure for not having been able to get into their desired programs and only coming to the University of the Aegean as a lesser option.

*“Actually I valued that transition [to Lesbos] as an exile, that I failed...as a person, that I failed my family. I was disowned by everyone, including myself. So I went here as an exile to redeem myself...”*

*“Passing in Athens...only those who were worthy actually went there.”*

This kind of transition is often navigated well by students once they pass the first year and make friendships and university relationships that provide support. Another student experienced depression for a number of years during university and had to take some time off; when asked about whether he felt he received enough support from the university, he said that he didn't expect any more support from professors than he had been given, at least in terms of deadlines. Still another student reported that, in addition to bullying, she was also the victim of a lot of gossip, having to contend with rumors both on the island and back at home.

For all students who had reported challenges, they also reported that social relationships help them navigate through the challenges of transitions. As mentioned prior about friendships in the first year, since students typically don't come to the university alongside friends from their hometowns, they need to create new friendships quickly in order to build a support network that will support them past the first year in which they renegotiate their new sense of self with their past. Outside of friendships, most students report experiencing mentorship with professors as an enabling factor of resilience during transition. The small class sizes and smallness of the community, though can have some heightened consequences during such a transitory period, can also produce deeply meaningful and caring relationships as well.



**Sub-Question 3 on spatiality in educational experiences:**

Sub-Question 3: What meaning do students derive from their experience of studying on the island?

A key theme that emerged from the findings was the ever-present notion of a core-periphery relationship between the island of Lesbos and Athens (or the mainland at large). Students will speak about the time it takes to go between Lesbos and Athens, how far they are from the mainland, and the opportunities and relationships that existed for them or they had imagined existed for them at a mainland university. This relationship with Athens is one that had been built over the course of a student's life. In the Greek student imagination, Athens, and similarly Thessaloniki, is for the worthy. The smartest, highest achieving students get to attend university there. Their friends will be attending there. They will be able to live with their parents, and they will make their parents proud and their lives easier by attending university there. Instead, all my participants attend the University of the Aegean. With that said, this initial feeling of desire can be replaced with enough time once students recognize certain traits about island university life that allows them to distance themselves from the expectations they had been put under. No longer under the constant pressure of needing to succeed, as they had leading up to and through the Panhellenic exams, students are now able to study in a completely different environment, and a smaller environment where the pressure to succeed isn't as high. Under this absence of duress, students are able to generate a new relationship with their education, one that can be tied to a place other than the imaginary of Athens.

The most salient example of this is when students mentioned feeling like they were coming to Lesbos like they were coming for exile, and then once they settled into their life here, they felt immense freedom.

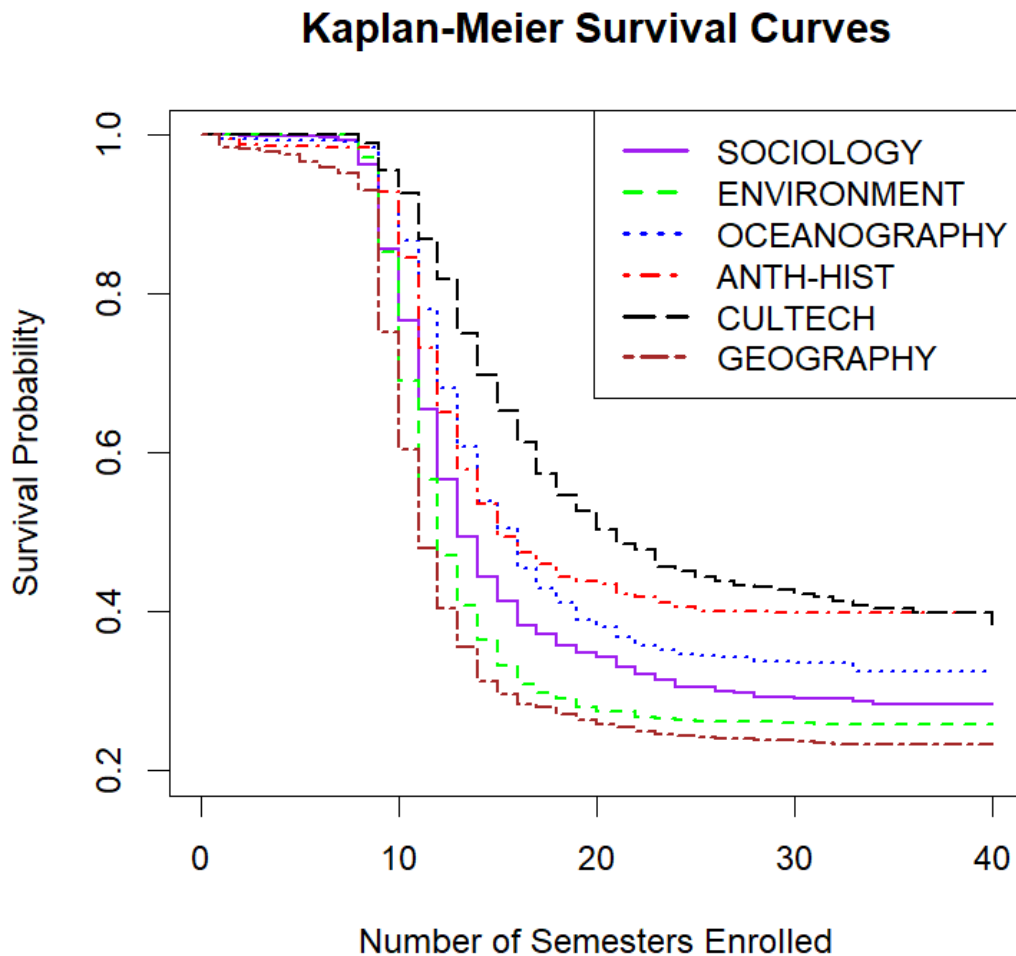
*“Actually, I adore this island. It represents to me freedom. It represents to me, responsibility for myself as an individual. It represents to me my personal growth as a person coming here, in my friendships, my relationships. I could say my completion of me as a human being started here, it is almost complete here to be honest.”*

Though this is a positive transformation of an otherwise initially negative reaction, life on the island has its limits for students. A number of students report that, though they love the university community, they don't care for the local island community. For students, living in such a small community is a boon, for all the reasons mentioned above, and a curse when a student recalls the bullying, isolation, and loneliness they can feel without a proper social net.

When asked about where they would like to go in the future, students typically reported that, though they really appreciate their time in Lesvos, they would like to explore options elsewhere for work, either trying their luck in Athens or Thessaloniki, or even going abroad. While the island has a transformative effect on the development of students during this transition period, the island is also associated with this period of transition, and not perhaps the period beyond that.

## Combining Survival Analysis with Qualitative Themes

By creating a Kaplan-Meier survival curve based on 20 years of graduation data, it can be discerned that disparities exist within the university on a macro level as well as the experiential level.



The figure above represents a survival analysis based on student enrollment records across the last 20 years (2003-2023) at the University of the Aegean. Across 20 years, student records exist for students based on the number of semesters they have completed so far to achieve two potential statuses: students who have left the university (transferred students or students who left the university; we can also conceive of these students within the category of attrition), and other students who have not. For those who have not, they have either

graduated or have not yet graduated; for both of these categories, these students have been plotted in the survival curve to visualize the likelihood that students will graduate, depending on how long they remain enrolled at the university. In recent years, students are no longer able to remain enrolled in the university within a rule of  $N + 2$ , that is, their “normal” graduating period of four years plus an additional two years; a number of students on this list for very extended periods of time have been on the list for decades and are represented by the rates of students who have enrolled for 20 or more semesters.

The significance of the survival curve highlights at least two key themes also demonstrated in the qualitative findings. Firstly, there is a corridor of a student who is more likely to graduate if they are within 10 semesters of their degree. Beyond that, their success rate immediately begins to drop and soon they will stagnate with other “eternal students” who find it difficult to graduate later in life. In the qualitative work, students expressed that there is a transformative experience on the island for students, but this transformative period does not last longer than 4-5 years, at which case students feel like their time has come to leave the island for opportunities elsewhere. This can mean that students beyond the 4-5 year might be re-conceiving their educational and work goals, though this needs to be further explored with additional qualitative research. It does mean that students who are most persistent towards graduation also do so within an allotted time frame and that persistence will lag detrimentally once students get further away from their starting cohort.

A second key theme that the survival analysis illustrates is that the university, though one singular entity, produces disparate outcomes for student success across its six departments. The “why” this happens cannot be explained with a Kaplan-Meier survival curve alone, but it can be clearly seen that certain departments have students who lag in their graduation far more than others, and for some departments whose students stay longer than 10 semesters, their chances of graduation fall far steeper. Comparing Geography and Cultural

Technology, the lows and the highs of the survival curves, we can see that Cultural Technology students fare the best in terms of graduating “on-time” and that even staying as long as 15 semesters means that Cultural Technology students still have a high likelihood of graduating. On the other hand, the changes for Geography students steeply decline at 10 semesters. The reasons why cannot be answered by this kind of analysis alone, but it does leave an opportunity in the future to understand the deeper causality which leads to this sudden drop in persistence in Geography students past 10 semesters.

Moving from the survival analysis back to the raw data, when observing three cohort years at 4 years apart, the years of 2010, 2014, and 2018, disparities in attrition (erased), graduated, and still active students (still yet to have graduated) are apparent between the Geography and Cultural Technology department. Though these discrepancies wouldn’t necessarily be as easily seen in qualitative data with the sample size in this study, at the scale of the student database, there is a clear trend in departmental outcomes for students, sparking important conversations on what needs to happen at an operational level for departments to understand their own department’s data and student experiences.

2010	2010 COUNTS	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	49	23	121	193
Geography	35	104	46	185	
Grand Total	84	127	167	378	

2014	2014 COUNTS	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	27	17	74	118
Geography	34	118	39	191	
Grand Total	61	135	113	309	

2018	2018 COUNTS	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	54	35	57	146
Geography	56	117	33	206	
Grand Total	110	152	90	352	

2010	2010 PERCENTAGE	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	25%	12%	63%	193
Geography	26%	12%	65%	185	
Grand Total	13%	6%	32%	378	

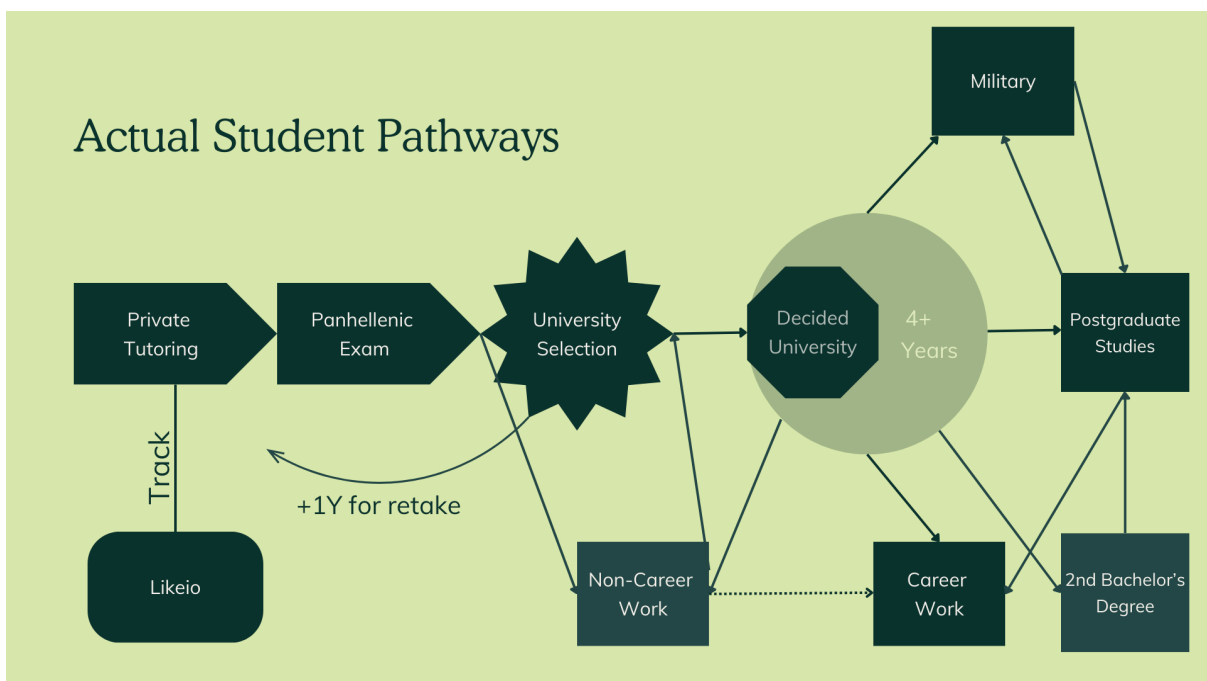
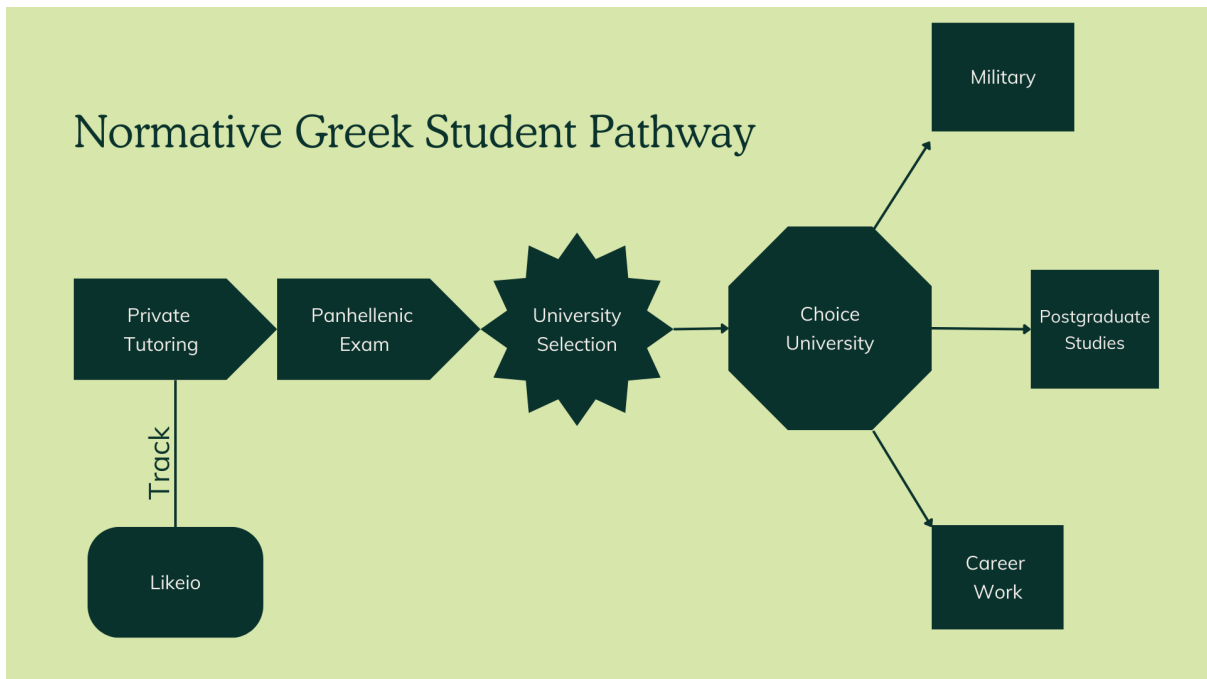
  

2014	2014 PERCENTAGE	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	23%	14%	63%	118
Geography	18%	62%	20%	191	
Grand Total	20%	44%	37%	309	

2018	2018 PERCENTAGE	Active	Erased	Graduated	Grand Total
	CulturalTechnology	37%	24%	39%	146
Geography	27%	57%	16%	206	
Grand Total	31%	43%	26%	352	

## 7. Discussion



Mapped out above are two kinds of student pathways: the expected, orthodox, normative student pathway which most Greek students might imagine to be the path they

follow, and the actual pathway, full of deviations, redirections, and alternative paths to what ends up happening in life. For the Greek students that were interviewed, they recognized that alternative pathways like the ones shown are their lived reality. Some students retake the Panellinies to try to get a different score. Some students take a break after high school and then return to school later. Some students imagine that they would like to transfer to a different, more prestigious university after taking a year at the University of the Aegean. Some students simply need more time in their studies - a compulsory course is particularly brutal, they have to work and study simultaneously, their family is in a precarious financial position and cannot afford to pay for housing and food this semester. The multitude of lived experiences possible, even within a small university, demonstrates that, when it comes to making progress in a degree, there's a number of sociological dimensions at play and life course experiences which determine a student's next step in their education and lives.

The island university of the University of the Aegean is a unique space of becoming for the Greek student because of the national, educational context in which Greek students select university and the way that the socioeconomic context of Greece amplifies not only the physical distance between Lesvos and the rest of Greece, but also shapes a sociocultural distance as well. The core-periphery relationship that the University of the Aegean has to other universities on the mainland mimics the economic relations between islands and the mainland cities in Greece. In a hub and spoke model, Greek students, especially from the mainland, envision that accessing higher education would mean accessing social and economic opportunities in places like Athens and Thessaloniki. Their lives are built up toward a successful passage through the Panellinies, which will grant them access to prestigious universities and affirm their value and character as worthy Greek students. If the University of the Aegean does not fit neatly into their future planning, the first year coming to the island can be particularly challenging, as well as transformative.

Small class sizes, close relationships with professors, new friend groups turning into smaller real friendships, and a changing relationship that one has with their education are common experiences for students who are able to make it through the first year on the island and remain persistent in coming back to continue their degrees. Students, though still drawn to social and economic opportunities that await them beyond the island, come to view the island and the island university and important thresholds that allow them to re-narrate the trajectory of their lives. As a space for brain rotation, the university serves its purpose of educating young Greeks in a way unique to the island. By the end of the spoke rather than the hub, Greek students find new reasons to continue their education that are formed out of a mix of social expectations, and changes in their personal and professional identity.

Yet, as we see in both narratives and student data, these experiences can still exist within the context of highly disparate outcomes for students. Why certain students make progress towards their degrees more easily or more quickly than others is a concern which needs to be addressed at the island level. In a national context where few Greek students at all will complete their undergraduate degrees, the onus is on the island university as an institution to understand the narratives and collective experiences of its students in order to shape conducive environments and relationships and uphold every student in their journey of persisting. Persistence, I argue, in an island context, has a unique relationship to time, as students reconfigure what timeline either makes sense or ends up happening in their life, as well as space, in which students must reimagine what kind of places and spaces they envisioned their education would put them in, grant them access to, and to where and from where they would escape to transform their lives.



## **Policy Recommendations**

Within these narratives and within a critical realist framework, this research recommends policy recommendations in 3 domains backed by insights from student experiences and student outcome data: institutional research, outreach and communication, and political advocacy.

### **Policy Recommendation 1: the university develops a cross-departmental institutional research task force to study disparate student outcomes.**

The task of understanding educational disparities in a public system lies on the entirety of the system. The university ought to dedicate resources in terms of budget, time, and capacity of its staff in order to explore what disparities have always existed, across departments, gender, cohort years, place of origin, etc. Which students remain as Eternal Students? Which students graduate within 4 years? What are the main triggers that cause a student to stay longer than 10 semesters? How does every degree track function in their own way to inhibit a student from maintaining progress toward their degree? And do we define a progressive year in credit hours, semester classes, compulsory course completion, or something else? The institutional research task force can also study what drives student disengagement as well as the decision to transfer out through qualitative insights. Lastly, the work of this task force can also work toward developing an early warning system for students on the verge of not completing within  $N + 2$  years, well before their 5th year at the university.

### **Policy Recommendation 2: the university develops a robust outreach and communications systems which is centralized and meets internal and external community needs.**

High school students imagine that their best opportunities in life lie in Athens or Thessaloniki, keeping Lesbos and the University of the Aegean out of their imagined future possible selves. Deepening the visibility of the university and what it has to offer not only increases enrollment rates, but also may increase student satisfaction if students receive the education they really want and need. Communication is not only an external need, but an internal support system that provides students with resources that they need when they need them. Many students interviewed spoke about the strength of their one-on-one relationships with professors, taking on additional projects with professors who spark joy and interest in the possibility of joining a certain event or a certain research topic. Potential university students during high school, newly enrolled students, and disengaged students should have in mind that these kinds of relationships are possible for all students and that the size of the university nurtures these academic possibilities.

In a similar vein, cross-year mentorship programming can also support new and potentially disengaging students who haven't been able to find their niche support group. For a number of students, having a few, but reliable friends was enough to keep them focused in their studies instead of longing for friendships made in their hometowns. Lastly, the university needs to consider developing new means to cultivate student voice beyond the current student assembly system. At the beginning of the semester of Spring 2024, students engaged in an academic protest against the potential inclusion of private universities in the country. Students self-organized to advance their mission against the university administration, but not alongside the university system. In the end, though students felt like they had made an impact culturally, what amounted to did not create systemic change to the way that the university and students communicate with one another. Developing new avenues for student voice can mean being seen as against the academic concerns and desires of the

student body, or being an ally to them.

**Policy Recommendation 3: the university needs to advocate for structural changes in education policy to support its students.**

Akin to the discussion on institutional research, the university needs to understand where the stop-gaps exist in each curricular pathway and determine what changes need to be made at an institutional or ministerial level in order to support students in their preparation for life after university, which may or may not require certain compulsory courses the way they are taught now. Two additional structural elements shape the ability for students to get the most out of their university experience and align with class differences. There should be consideration for moving dormitories located nearer to the city center and increase access to free meals for students. By these means, students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still able to fully participate in the life of the city center and the campus life with less concern about how cost-prohibitive life at the island university is. Lastly, being located on an island puts the student body at a practical disadvantage when it comes to maintaining connections with home. The university can advocate for a re-evaluation in the transportation subsidies provided for students so that current students can foresee connections all around the country as a possibility; for students who have yet to make the choice to come to Lesvos, an increased subsidy could be the decision-maker between studying at a preferred department in Lesvos versus one nearby their home.

## **8. Conclusion**

What this research aims to accomplish is establish that the specific social, spatial, and historical context of Lesvos the island is important in understanding how persistence at the University of the Aegean is experienced by students. Process of becoming happens on the island in a way differently than the mainland or elsewhere and the way that process of becoming affects student persistence is vital to understanding both the student experience and what leads to divergent student outcomes. The island university is a transformative space for students, but that ability to transform the lives of young people is endangered if student enrollment declines and student disengagement is on the rise. Students seek an education as a means for making their possible selves a reality and island universities in archipelago nations like Greece must continue to be tasked with delivering a quality education to the Greek public, with astute attention to the ways that spatial justice is embedded in educational equity.

### **Research Limitations and Research Next Steps**

This research was conducted within a certain time frame, providing allowances for rapid student recruitment, but not necessarily a fully representative recruitment process. All interviews were conducted in English, with currently enrolled students who attend the university on a weekly basis, who are engaged enough to want to be interviewed, and have the time to be interviewed which is not spent on coursework or a job. These factors still limit the research process in understanding the breadth of Greek undergraduate student experiences at the University of the Aegean. To fully understand the dimensions of persistence, future research needs to be conducted with additional populations: students who enrolled at the university but never matriculated, students who transferred out, and the Eternal students who have not completed their degrees after much time on enrollment rosters. These voices are still not yet heard and are vital to the conversation.

The future of this research also lies in deeper engagement with existing and evolving educational models and theories about student persistence. Though much of the literature remains entrenched in contexts in the USA and UK, key educational models such as Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model remain highly relevant to the world of educational studies at large. Future engagement between education theorists and social scientists concerned with spatiality are needed to continue building out the theoretical space that a field like island studies is making, and meeting the boundaries between disciplines like education, geography, and sociology to develop new epistemologies of spatial justice.

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## 10. Appendix

### Participant Recruitment List

Department	Recruitment	GENDER	Cohort	PLACE OF ORIGIN
Cultural Technology	Campus	F	2022	Mytilini
Cultural Technology	Department	F	2017	Athens
Cultural Technology	Department	M	2019	Macedonia
Cultural Technology	Department	M	2021	Agrinio
Cultural Technology	Department	F	2007	Agrinio/Mytilini
Environmental Sciences	Department	F	2022	Athens/Karpathos
Environmental Sciences	Department	F	2022	Mytilini
Environmental Sciences	Department	M	2022	Athens
Environmental Sciences	Department	M	2019	Athens
Geography	Campus	M	2021	Athens
Geography	Campus	M	2021	Thessaloniki
Oceanography	Campus	M	2018	Athens
Oceanography	Department	F	2022	Volos
Oceanography	Department	F	2022	Athens
Oceanography	Department	F	2022	Athens/Evvia
Oceanography	Department	F	2022	Erakleio
Oceanography	Department	NB	2021	Athens
Oceanography	Department	M	2023 (SP)	Athens
Social Anthropology & History	Department	M	2019	Mytilini
Social Anthropology & History	Department	F	2022	Pyrgos Hleias
Social Anthropology & History	Department	F	2022	Thessaloniki
Social Anthropology & History	Word-of-Mouth	F	2020	Athens
Sociology	Campus	M	2018	Athens
Sociology	Campus	F	2019	Athens/Epirus
Sociology	Word-of-Mouth	M	2019	Thessaloniki
Sociology	Department	M	2021	Athens
Sociology	Department	M	2022	Mytilini
Sociology	Department	F	2019	Athens
Sociology	Department	F	2023	Athens

### Preparing Student Data for Survival Analysis

B	C	D	E	F
Status	Department	Gender	Semest	Age_Ins
Active	Oceanography	Female	11	21
Active	Oceanography	Female	10	21
Active	Environmental Science	Male	27	21
Graduated	Sociology	Female	14	21
Active	Oceanography	Male	29	21
Erased	Oceanography	Male	2	21
Graduated	Sociology	Male	8	21
Active	Sociology	Male	6	21
Active	CulturalTechnology	Female	14	21
Erased	Sociology	Female	1	21
Graduated	Sociology	Female	10	21
Graduated	Geography	Male	14	21
Active	Geography	Male	6	21
Active	AnthropologyHistory	Female	14	21
Graduated	AnthropologyHistory	Female	13	21
Active	Geography	Male	4	21
Active	CulturalTechnology	Male	16	21
Active	CulturalTechnology	Male	4	21
Active	Geography	Female	8	21

## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Understanding Student Decision-Making Processes in Enrolling at the University of the Aegean in Lesvos

Dear participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This letter explains what the research entails and how the research will be conducted. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If any information is not clear, kindly ask questions using the contact details of the researchers provided at the end of this letter.

### **WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?**

- This study aims to understand what drives Greek students to enroll and stay enrolled at the University of the Aegean.

### **WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?**

- Participation in this study entails expressing your own experiences in the form of a semi-structured interview – you will be asked questions that guide the overall structure of the interview, but are free to express yourself as freely as you like.

### **DO YOU HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

- Participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- As a participant, you can also choose to withdraw from the study at any moment and choose not to answer questions without consequences or providing reasons

### **ARE THERE ANY RISKS IN PARTICIPATING?**

- This research may reveal personal and sensitive experiences.
- The information you provide will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used instead of personal identifiers.

### **ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IN PARTICIPATING?**

- There are no direct benefits to the participant, but the research they help create may contribute to further knowledge on the topics of the study, both academically and professionally.

### **HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?**

- Data will be gathered by means of audio recording, then transcribed using transcription software aided by AI, and stored on a cloud folder with end-to-end encryption and password protection.
- All data used in the final report, including names, will be pseudonymized.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

- The insights will be analysed and included in academic research papers following data collection.

### **ETHICS**

- The researcher will uphold themselves to relevant ethical standards, namely the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity 2018 (GDPR compliant).

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

- By signing the informed consent form, you confirm that you have the intention to participate, while still being able to withdraw at any time.

### **WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?**

- For any additional information, you can contact the researcher, Vannak Khin, at [v.b.khin@student.rug.nl](mailto:v.b.khin@student.rug.nl) or his supervisor, Dr. Thanasis Kizos, at [akizos@aegean.gr](mailto:akizos@aegean.gr).

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Title study:

Understanding Student Decision-Making Processes in Enrolling at the University of the Aegean in Lesvos  
(Tentative Title)

### Name of Participant (Please print):

### Assessment

- I have received this consent form in English.
- I have read the information sheet and was able to ask any additional question to the researcher.
- I understand I may ask questions about the study at any time.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that at any time I can refuse to answer any question without any consequences.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

### Confidentiality and Data Use

- I understand that none of my individual information will be disclosed to anyone outside the researcher and my name will not be published.
- I understand that the information provided will be used only for research conducted by this researcher.
- I understand that data (consent forms, audio recordings, interview transcripts) will be retained in a secure cloud location.

### Future involvement

- I wish to receive a copy of the scientific output of the project.
- I consent to be re-contacted for participating in future studies.

**Having read and understood all the above, I agree to participate in the research study: yes / no**

### Date

### Signature

To be filled in by the researcher

- I declare that I have thoroughly informed the research participant about the research study and answered any remaining questions to the best of my knowledge.
- I agree that this person participates in the research study.

### Date

### Signature

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### ◆ Introduction:

Hello, my name is Vannak. I am a postgraduate student in the geography department. I am from the United States, but my family is originally from Cambodia. I am interested in studying how students chose to study at this university.

### Review:

- First time being interviewed?
- Seek participant feedback at the end
- Consent form, withdrawing consent, stopping interview
- Data sharing with supervisor/university
- Pseudonyms
- 20+ interviews in total
- Findings will be presented in June
- Participant must read and sign consent form

### Procedure:

- 30-45 minutes, but can go longer
- 1 interview/day, no rush for time
- Recorded with phone, then transcribed using AI software
- Password protected, only researcher has access

### Life History Interview:

- Explanation of a life history interview, stretching back to present
- Explain calendar method
- Structure of interview: **demographics, Δημοτική Εκπαίδευση, Γυμνάσιο, Λύκειο, enrollment, Πανεπιστήμιο**

Any questions?

I will begin recording and start now:

### ◆ Demographics Questions:

Name	Student Classification
Year of Birth	Cohort Year
Gender	Place of Origin (Participant)
Department	Place of Origin (Family)

### ◆ Early Years

#### Προνηπιαγωγείο, Νηπιαγωγείο, Δημοτική Εκπαίδευση:

- Tell me more about your family (siblings, parents, where you/family grew up, work)
- Did your parents go to university?
- What kind of friends did you have when you were young?
- Did you have hobbies as a kid?
- How did you start learning English?
- What kind of student were you like back then?
- How did this change as you grew older?

### ◆ Secondary School

#### Γυμνάσιο

- How did hobbies, friends and other experiences change during this time?
- When did your family start discussing university? What was their perspective?
- How did your teachers talk about attending university?
- Did your friends talk about going to university back then?
- Do you feel like γυμνάσιο prepared you well for λύκειο?

### ◆ High School

#### Λύκειο (Γενικό Λύκειο, Ενιαίο Λύκειο)

- Was your experience in λύκειο different from previous years? How so?
- Do you feel like your classes in λύκειο prepared you well for life after high school?
- How did you form ideas about what kind of career you would want in the future?
- What was your experience like with the national exam at the end of high school?
- Students sometimes have to give up activities to prepare for the exams at the end of Λύκειο. Was this also your experience?

### ◆ University Selection & Enrollment

- Tell me about the process and support for considering university (including friends and family).
- Were you considering other options than university when you were near the end of high school?
- What kind of experiences were you looking forward to in university back then?
- How did you select your top schools and departments for university?
- What do you think affected your decision to attend university the most? Friends, family, your own expectations, or something else?

**◆ University**

- Tell me what your experience has been like so far in university.
- What was exciting about the idea of starting university? What made you nervous?
- What was studying like in your first year?
- What was your social life like in your first year?
- How have your expectations about your studies changed since you began?
- What have been some meaningful experiences on Lesvos which you did not expect?
- What would you like to have more from your university learning experience so far?
- What else would you like in your general life on Lesvos?

**◆ End Interview**

- How do you feel about the questions I asked today?
- Review interview guide together
- Snowball recruitment
- Open to follow up questions and comments
- Contacting the researcher
- End recording