

# Higher Education and Cultural Capital: The Role of Parental Education in Greek Medical School Choices

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between parental educational attainment and access to Greek medical schools from 2006 to 2014, employing Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus as a theoretical framework. The findings reveal a strong association between students' access to prestigious medical schools and their parents' educational attainment, with 72% of entrants having parents holding tertiary qualifications. This pattern reflects the systemic advantage conferred by higher cultural and social capital, which equips students from privileged backgrounds with the resources and dispositions necessary to succeed in competitive academic environments. Despite policies aimed at expanding higher education access, the results highlight persistent stratification, where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remain underrepresented. While the Greek economic crisis temporarily influenced admission thresholds, particularly among middle-class families, it did not significantly disrupt existing hierarchies within medical education. These findings align with global studies demonstrating that widening access does not inherently eliminate qualitative disparities within elite educational pathways. The study underscores the need for comprehensive policy reforms addressing structural inequalities in higher education, emphasizing not only expanded access but also equitable representation in high-status fields like medicine.

## Keywords:

Higher education, Cultural theory, Habitus, Bourdieu, Social origin, Parental education, Greek medical schools

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## Introduction

Following the devastating aftermaths of World War II, a paradigm-shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge-and information-based society took place, which significantly transformed the structure of social and economic relationships, prioritizing the efficient use of information and knowledge. This transition, facilitated by advancements in modern technology, necessitates a highly trained workforce for both personal and national development (Kumar, 1998). Education and particularly, Higher Education, has therefore assumed a pivotal role in preparing individuals to engage in such societies, facilitating smoother transition into the labor market, fostering social mobility and enhancing their life prospects (Luthra & Flashman, 2017).

Since the 1990s, the European Union in collaboration with National efforts/policies, have sought to expand University access, encompassing initiatives designed to create an inclusive higher education system, by addressing social, cultural, economic, and institutional barriers, that deter marginalized groups (Allen and Storan, 2005). These efforts led to significant increases in higher education enrollment, nearly doubling the participation rates, for example in Sweden and UK (Johansson et al., 2005). Similar results were achieved in Greece's tertiary education, where by 2015 the attainment rate reached ca 40%, surpassing the European Union average of ca 38% (De Lel et al., 2015).

In Greece, the admission to higher education is determined by nationwide university entrance exams (Panhellenic Exams) conducted annually, after High School, where the number of available places is regulated by The Ministry of National Education. Inevitably, a strong competition has been established between candidates for the limited spots in the privileged departments. These include: a) Medical schools, which require the highest admission scores, b) Technical schools, c) Law schools, and d) Schools and Departments corresponding to modern branches of the Financial system (Gouvias, 2010; Kyriazis & Asderaki, 2008).

## Social Origin and Access to Higher Education

In the last decades, it is a fact that the impressively large increase in admissions to Higher Education, has caused the overproduction of graduates, the inflation of degrees, resulting in the discounting of their symbolic value and their reduced utilization in the labor market, leading to lower absorption in the professional arena. Thus, the degradation of degrees with lower absorption has led to a hunt for the 'right' university schools and departments by candidates and their families, in order to ensure not only access for potential students but also their professional rehabilitation and social prestige. Inevitably, a competition has been created between candidates for the privileged departments, which promise the best prospects both economically and socially.

Equality of opportunity in education has the ultimate goal of giving all stakeholders equal opportunities to access the highest positions in society, characterized by prestige, high pay and values. However, recent sociological studies reveal that despite the increasing number of young people gaining access to higher education, the distribution of the student population in highly prestigious schools is disproportional, favoring people from privileged social strata due to their greater cultural, social, and economic capital (Jerrim, 2013), while students



from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to enroll in less prestigious schools (Lucas and Byrne, 2017). In this respect, increasing access to higher education alone does not guarantee equity; rather, the stratification within the system perpetuates existing inequalities, which tend to favor students from already affluent socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Kyridis, 2015; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006, 2008, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Whelan & Hannan, 1999)

A strong correlation has been identified between the social background of subjects and their academic choices (Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009; Hatcher, 1998). Entrants choices are influenced by political, economic and social factors, as well as gender and cultural-formative capital, i.e. the ethos, values and dispositions of their family (Bourdieu, 2002:207). The social background of potential students seems to determine their educational path, without of course implying that it is the only factor that influences educational inequalities.

In higher education, social inequalities occur both at the level of access and at the level of allocation to schools. They become more acute as competition in demand for prestigious schools increases and as the socio-economic environment deteriorates. The social and cultural background of students' families in turn contributes to shaping their own culture through the accumulation and development of a system of dispositions that influence their educational success. The amount of cultural, social and economic capital available to the family, contributes significantly to the choices that determine the educational path of young people (Tsikalaki & Kladi Kokkinou, 2016).

Finally, a number of other inequalities, stemming from the external economic, social, cultural, environment, intensify inequality in education, such as the funding model, regional unequal distribution of funds, bureaucratic control, local society and culture, etc. Such a strong external economic factor was the *Economic Crisis* that started in Greece in 2010 until 2018. The economic crisis was a period of deep, prolonged recession where unemployment, part-time employment and unpaid work skyrocketed, public and private funding plummeted leading to the social disintegration of structures, including universities. Thousands of students in Greece, in a climate of collapse, were called upon to make crucial decisions about their future, which were taken in the context of a family strategy, directly linked to the wider socioeconomical context, which required the family to make high financial expenditures for tuition, an expenditure that was a one-way street even for parents from a lower social class (Kyridis, 1997).

### **Cultural Theory, Habitus and Educational Choices**

Cultural theory was developed by Bourdieu in the 1960s. According to this theory, education is part of a superstructure that emphasizes the cultural capital that parents pass on to their children, which is socially differentiated and which rewards the children of the upper-dominant class in terms of their school and educational progress (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010:77). In this theory, the focus shifts from economic factors - i.e. the economic capital that each family possesses to help its children's careers - to cultural factors, i.e. the cultural - spiritual and symbolic sovereignty with which each family provides its offspring, its heirs. In other words, cultural capital is 'the sum total of the intellectual, primarily intellectual elements, such as knowledge, attitudes, skills, which the



young person acquires from his immediate family environment and which is differentiated according to his social class. More specifically, it concerns the social relations of the family, help with schoolwork and information about education and the paths it leads to. Other expressions of cultural capital include attending and participating in cultural events, the art of conversation, such as pronunciation and the 'correct' tone and style of voice, 'good' taste, style, wit and, in general, socially acceptable ways of doing and saying things. In sum, we could say that parents, depending on their level of education, directly influence their children's future choices, in this case for their studies (Paterekas, 1986).

Candidates who succeed in gaining admission to prestigious schools and departments with significant career prospects are usually children of the upper classes, who have grown up in a privileged environment and have inherited from their parents not only an economic, but mainly a cultural heritage (Kirides, 1997:108; Bourdieu, 1994:67). Furthermore, the results of recent sociological research show that the family model, as well as the cultural, economic and social capital of the family, have a significant impact on the educational choices of middle- and working-class young people. This in turn influences the differentiated educational opportunities and perspectives of social subjects. In particular, young people from the middle social strata have stronger 'stocks' of 'family' cultural, economic and social capital and are oriented towards choosing studies with high social and academic prestige, such as medicine and law. The experiences of the parents of young people from middle-class backgrounds, who have graduated from higher education seem to reinforce the choices and orientation of their children towards university studies. In this case, both young people and their parents aim, through high-quality student choices, to maintain their social status and ensure the reproduction of their social privileges.

On the other hand, young people from working-class backgrounds, whose families have low levels of social, economic and cultural capital, tend to make 'pragmatic' choices in search of more 'compromising' educational outlets. International research shows that children from upper-class families with high educational capital and prestigious professions, such as scientists, senior civil servants and businessmen, are more likely to succeed in school and go to university than middle- and even lower-class children. Also, as far as the children of teachers are concerned, although they belong to the middle classes, they are a special category as they have the highest success rate.

As Bourdieu points out, even if some educational policy provides equal economic opportunities for all subjects, the gaps caused by the lack of cultural heritage cannot be filled. To prove this point, Bourdieu refers to the research of M. Paul Clerc (1964) who showed that students from families with the same educational background but different economic levels do not show any difference in their school performance. On the contrary, students coming from families with the same economic status but different educational capital differ in their performance. High educational and cultural capital of the family has a positive impact on school success, as children from these families perform better in all cognitive domains such as written and spoken language, mathematics, have higher academic achievements and more years of study.

In addition, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* offers a robust framework for understanding how social and cultural factors shape students' educational trajectories. *Habitus* refers to the system of dispositions, attitudes, and



behaviors that individuals develop through their socialization within particular cultural and social contexts. It mediates the transfer of cultural capital, as it reflects the internalized experiences of an individual's family, social environment, and class position, influencing their perceptions, aspirations, and actions. Bourdieu posits that *habitus* develops through the accumulation of experiences, influencing the choices of social subjects and the achievement of their goals, arguing that it is a system of enduring, transferable dispositions that unifies past experiences, functions at any given moment as a matrix of perceptions and enables the achievement of various tasks (Bourdieu, 1977:83).

According to Bourdieu, the *habitus* formed during childhood through direct experiences or familial, often spontaneous, education does not rigidly determine an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and practices throughout their life. Instead, while *habitus* evolves with new experiences, the primary *habitus* shaped by family influences serves as the foundational framework for later dispositions of thought, perception, and action. This foundational influence makes educational choices, including the pursuit of high-level studies, deeply rooted in class-based *habitus*, which itself reflects the social origins of individuals (Bourdieu, 2006; Accardo, 1991). However, *habitus* is not entirely immutable. Exposure to higher education environments through programs aimed at widening participation can challenge and reshape existing *habitus* by equipping students with cultural and social resources they might otherwise lack. To be effective, such interventions must transcend merely increasing enrollment; they must dismantle systemic barriers within the education system to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds can access and succeed in prestigious academic fields (Reay et al., 2005).

It is important to point out that the influence of *habitus* extends beyond socioeconomic status to intersect with other variables, such as gender and geographic location. For instance, research shows that gendered expectations within families can channel male and female students toward different academic fields, reflecting the gendered nature of *habitus* (David et al., 2003).

In conclusion, parents coming from the upper social layers/strata, parents with a high level of education, apart from education, seem to have a remarkable general culture, are confident in themselves, confident and self-respecting for their professional and financial success, elements that they successfully transmit to their children, thus creating internal motivation and ambitions for the same level of career, in order to set high goals and claim high-ranking schools for their offsprings. The choice of higher education is essentially a social choice. Therefore, the social structure is reproduced through higher education.

## Method

Based on the aforementioned literature review, which highlighted the fact that higher education is a highly stratified sector, i.e. students from different socioeconomic groups/origins attend different higher education institutions and courses of study, this case study aims to examine, under the prism of Cultural Theory, the relationship between the educational level of students' parents and their choice of Greek Medical schools, for the years 2006-2014, including the effects of Greek Economic Crisis. It is worth noting that Medical Schools were



specifically chosen not only due to their prestigious reputation, resulting in both high demand and high required admission scores, but also because of the professional opportunities they offer to their graduates.

The first stage of the present research for the years 2006-2014, including the period of Greek Economic Crisis, is related to the search and retrieval of the statistical data available in the database of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT, <https://www.statistics.gr/>), regarding the admission scores and number of entrants per year per Medical School (Health Sciences). All seven Greek Medical Schools were considered, i.e. Athens, Thessaly, Thessaloniki, Thrace, Ioannina, Crete and Patras.

ELSTAT also collects demographic data from all first-year students who enter higher education. Both parents' educational levels/degrees were considered as the demographic index of interest, spanning from: i) Doctoral (PhD)/Master's degree (MSc), ii) Higher Educational Institution degree (HEI)-Bachelor's degree, iii) Higher Technological Educational Institution degree (HTEI) or equivalent Technical School, iv) High School diploma, v) Junior High School diploma, vi) Primary Education diploma and vii) not completing Primary education or Illiterate. The data were stored, organized accordingly and processed using Microsoft Excel. The result findings are presented below.

## Results

This section presents the results of the collected data analysis for the Greek Schools of Medicine from 2006 to 2014. The results are split in two sections, the first with regard to the admission scores and number of entrants and the second part regard the entrant's parental education level.

### Admission Scores and Number of Entrants

Figure 1, plots the admission points (the score of the last admitted student) evolution for the seven Medical Schools of the country during the academic years of this study, 2006 to 2014. With a maximum attainable score of 20000 points and a total of ca 1000 available places for entrants per year, it is evident that the required admission points *for all Medical Schools* of the country, were amongst the highest in the Panhellenic examinations, reflecting not only the high demand and prestige of the medical profession, but the strong competition between the candidates as well.

In the same graph, it is shown that the Medical School in the largest urban center of the country, Athens, has consistently the highest admission scores for all years, compared to the other departments in the country. This persistence can be explained by the fact that large urban centers, let alone the largest one, are home to the largest number of candidates, who wish to enter the Medical School and stay in their place of residence for financial reasons. Moreover, it expresses the desire of many candidates from all over Greece to study Medicine in large urban centers, since these centers accumulate and provide high cultural capital, which is an important attraction for young people, especially students.

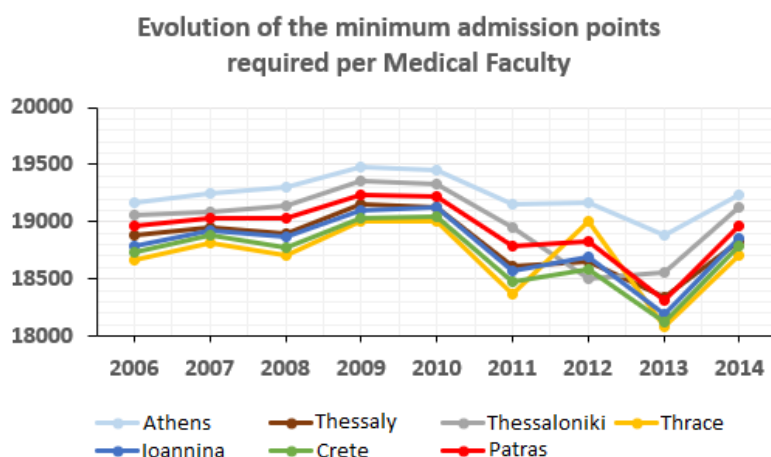


Figure 1. Minimum Admission Points for Medical Schools (2006-2014).

Regarding the evolution of the required admission threshold points over the years, it is interesting that during the academic years from 2006 up to the financial crisis of 2010, the trend was upward with little variation for all Medical Departments, while from 2011 to 2013, there is a clear downward trend with greater variation in almost all Schools of Medicine, until the year 2014 where the admission scores recover. A possible, but not the only one -due to the limited data and parameters studied- explanation of this behavior can be attributed to the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2010, that hit all social strata economically, especially the middle class, from which, as we have seen in the theoretical analysis, most of the candidates originate.

A last notable observation in Figure 1 concerns the rise of the admission threshold for Thrace Medical School for the academic year 2012. A plausible explanation for this spike could be the high order of preference due to the lower admission threshold of the previous years, i.e. candidates, due to their "low" performance in the Panhellenic examinations in 2012, knowing that in previous years Thrace Medical School had consistently the lowest admission scores amongst the other medicine schools, chose it with a higher order of preference in order to ensure their access, causing an increase in demand for the department with a concomitant rise in its admission threshold.

In Figure 2, the evolution of first year admitted students at the Greek Medical Faculties is shown. We first observe that the number of entrants is highest in the three major urban centers of Greece i.e. Athens, Thessaloniki and Patras. It exhibits an upward trend for almost all Medical Schools and for all academic years under study, with the exception of the Medical School in Thessaloniki, which in 2010, exhibited a drop in the number of admissions, of ca 35% from 2006.

In the upper part of the same graph, the total number of new entrants to all medical schools by academic year is shown. This graph confirms the upward trend shown by all faculties where in particular, an increase of 43% in





2014 compared to 2006 in the total number of new entrants is observed, declaring that medical schools maintained their high demand and prestige amidst the economic crisis.

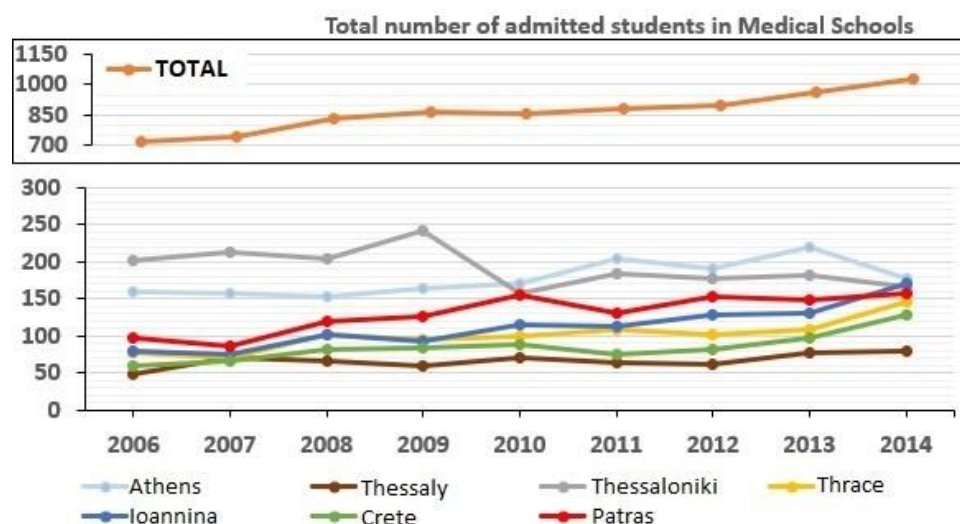


Figure 2. Top: Total Number of Admitted Medical Students Per Academic Year. Bottom: Number of Admitted Students Per School of Medicine.

### Entrants Parents' Education Level

Bar Figure 3 present the percentage of students' parents (father and mother) sorted by educational level, for the Medical Schools of the three (for brevity) largest Greek urban centers, for the academic years 2006-2014. It is clear that the highest percentage (>40%). However, since the proportion of educational level of the other categories shows greater variation by Medicine School, to get a global view, Figure 4 shows the overall distribution of parents of new admitted students distributed by their educational level, for all medical schools and for all academic years (2006-2014).

According to Figure 4, out of the 23293 parents in total, 42.9% of them hold a university degree (HEI), 22.2% a master's or doctoral degree, 21.2% are High School graduates, 6.8% hold a HTEI degree or from a similar institution, 3.5% are parents who completed Junior High School, similarly 3.2% have completed only Primary School while a small 0.2% belongs to those who haven't completed primary school education or are illiterate.



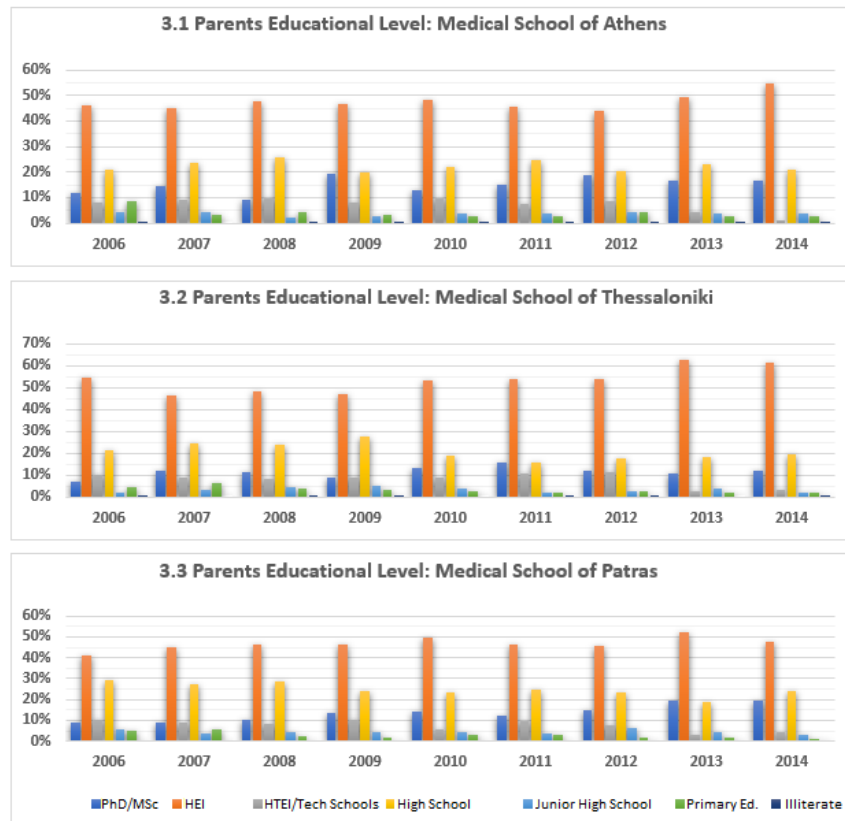


Figure 3. Parents' Educational Level Distribution for Three Medical Schools (2006-2014).

By summing the number of PhD/MSc and HEI holders we observe that 71.9% of student's parents (ca 7 out of 10) have successfully completed tertiary education, 24.7% of parents are graduates of secondary education (High School and Junior High School) and the remaining 3.4% have a background from primary education. These percentages confirm the influence of parents' educational level on their children's choice of schools for tertiary education, without, of course, ignoring the economic factors, since parents coming from tertiary education usually have higher income and hence can finance much more comfortably their children's educational needs.

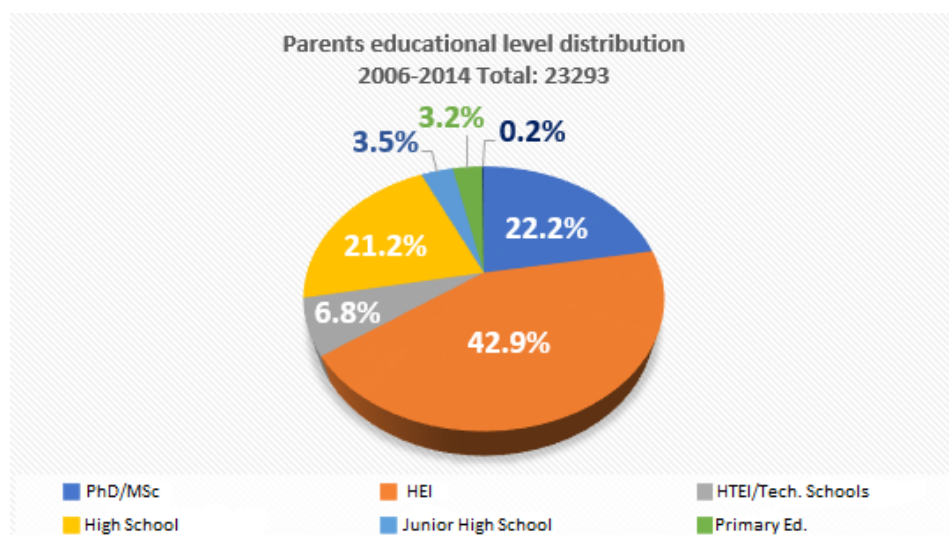


Figure 4. Parents' Educational Level Cumulative Distribution Across all Medical Faculties (2006-2014).



Finally, in Figure 5, we present the evolution of the absolute number of parents, by level of education, for the considered nine academic years and all Medical Schools, as the number of new medical students increases. It is highly evident that during these years, the number of parents who hold an HEI degree is not only greater than the rest educational levels, but is constantly increasing.

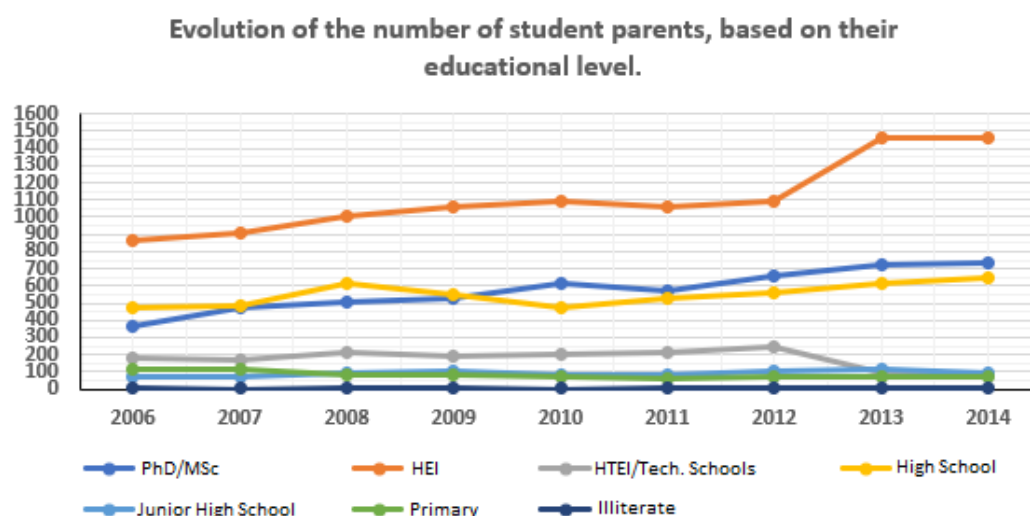


Figure 5. Yearly Evolution of Parents' Education Levels Across all Medical Schools.

A similar upward trend is exhibited by the category of parents who hold a Master's or Doctoral degree as well as those who are high school graduates. The remaining categories show minimal variation. This demonstrates that parents with higher educational level are directing their children to prestigious and professionally promising Schools, while parents of lower educational levels and HTEI (KATEE/ATEI) choose different and more practical professional approaches, which require less years of study. As a side note Greek Medicine Schools' curricula require at least 6 years of study for General Medicine which is further increased depending on the specific Medical Specialty requirements.

## Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of parental education as a marker of cultural capital in shaping access to Greek medical schools from 2006 to 2014. Bourdieu's cultural theory and the concept of *habitus* offer an insightful framework for understanding these dynamics. Bourdieu posits that cultural capital—manifested in the knowledge, dispositions, and intellectual resources transmitted by families—enables children from privileged social backgrounds to navigate competitive educational environments with relative ease (Bourdieu, 2002). This study affirms that students from families with higher educational attainment are overrepresented in Greek medical schools, with 72% of entrants having parents who hold tertiary qualifications (HEI, Master's, or Ph.D.). These findings align well with earlier research demonstrating that higher cultural capital shapes students' choices towards prestigious and demanding fields like medicine, law and engineering (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010).

The persistent overrepresentation of students from privileged social strata reflects the enduring stratification of



higher education. Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and theory of cultural capital is particularly relevant here, as it encapsulates the dispositions and inclinations shaped by familial and social contexts that guide students' educational choices. For example, families with higher cultural capital tend to instill ambitions for prestigious careers, channeling their children toward high-status fields such as medicine. This process aligns with recent findings (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009; Tsiplakides, 2018), who highlighted that access to elite educational pathways is systematically mediated by socioeconomic and cultural advantages. Conversely, students from working-class families, constrained by limited cultural and economic capital, often gravitate toward less prestigious educational opportunities, as also observed by Reay (2001) in Britain, claiming that they feel familiar to such an environment and they believe that it is easier to adjust.

The finding that ca 21% of the parents are High School diploma holders, demonstrates that medical schools are not entirely inaccessible to families with lower formal educational attainment, indicating some level of upward mobility within the education system. While these families may lack formal tertiary education, they might still possess certain forms of capital—such as strong familial support, high ambitions, emphasis on academic achievement, or even access to external preparatory resources—that enable their children to succeed.

The stratification observed in this study suggest that while policies aiming to expand access, such as the EU's widening participation initiatives, may increase enrollment, they fail to address the deeper structural inequities embedded within the education system. The persistence of these patterns aligns with the broader literature on educational stratification. Lucas (2001), for example, proposed the *Effectively Maintained Inequality* (EMI) theory, which suggests that socioeconomic inequalities are maintained not only through access but also through differentiation within educational systems. While Marks (2013) critiques EMI, arguing that academic ability and interests often mediate outcomes, his findings nonetheless highlight the complexities of how *habitus* interacts with other factors to shape educational choices.

The economic crisis in Greece between 2010 and 2018 further amplified these disparities. The study shows a temporary decline in admission thresholds during the crisis years, likely reflecting the financial hardships disproportionately impacted middle and lower socioeconomic groups. This observation echoes research by Kyridis (1997) and Gouvias (2010), who emphasized the vulnerability of educational aspirations to economic pressures, particularly in disciplines with long study durations and significant financial demands. Nevertheless, the resilience of medical schools' prestige and demand amidst the crisis indicates the enduring societal value and allure attributed to the medical profession.

### Research Limitations and Future Recommendations

Even though the insightful findings of this work are in good agreement with current and earlier studies in the literature, this study is still constrained by its focus on quantitative data based on the parental educational attainment index, which captures only a single dimension of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, neglecting qualitative insights into the motivations or challenges faced by prospect students from diverse backgrounds. Future research could incorporate interviews or surveys to explore the nuanced motivations and barriers faced by



students from diverse backgrounds and include more variables such as gender, etc. in order to capture the complex nature of *habitus*.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the enduring influence of cultural capital, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, on access to Greek medical schools in the years 2006-2014 including the effects of the Greek Economic Crisis. The findings reveal that despite increasing enrollment rates and efforts to democratize higher education, access to prestigious fields like medicine remains heavily stratified, favoring students from families with higher educational attainment. These disparities underscore the persistence of systemic inequalities in educational pathways, perpetuated through familial transmission of cultural and social capital. In particular, the majority of parents (more than 72%) were graduates of higher education, holding university degrees (BSc, MSc and PhDs). There was also a significant number of parents (ca 21%) who came from secondary education, actively seeking a better future for their children with social and professional recognition and prospects respectively. The economic crisis in Greece further complicated these dynamics, momentarily lowering admission thresholds and reflecting broader societal vulnerabilities. In conclusion, the interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors continues to shape educational trajectories in ways that reproduce social hierarchies, emphasizing the need for ongoing research and targeted interventions to foster genuine equity in higher education.

## Author(s)' Statements on Ethics and Conflict of Interest

**Ethics Statement:** We hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute. This study does not involve qualitative or quantitative data collection methods that require ethics committee approval, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, experiments, or similar techniques. Therefore, obtaining approval from an ethics committee does not apply to this research.

**Statement of Interest:** We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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