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**The importance of SWOT Analysis for educational units that
belong to the field of Vocational Education and Training:
The case of the State Institute (IEK) of Epanomi in Thessaloniki,
Greece¹**

Abstract: Educational units constitute a considerably separate category of organisations due to the complexity they present compared to all other organisations. The fact that they belong to this particular category of organisations in general presupposes the urgent necessity to operate and even be administrated as effectively as possible so as to be in the position to achieve further advances of development. Programming is regarded as the first step in the process of administration. Strategic programming concerns the long-term planning, which focuses on the general orientation of the organisation and the designation of the long-term goals, taking into account the environment and the conditions in which the organisation operates. One of the most important phases concerning this kind of planning is the SWOT Analysis. This analysis is of crucial importance for the institutes of Vocational Training (IEKs) in Greece since, unlike other school units, they appear to be decentralised to a great extent from the higher authority of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. Consequently, they are given the opportunity to exploit the advantages of strategic planning as they seem to be in the privileged position to handle matters of either human or material resource management independently. The state Institute of Vocational Training (IEK) in Epanomi is one of those institutes that are located outside the city of Thessaloniki. This fact creates responsibilities on behalf of the directors demanding their appropriate targeted steps that will lead to its further growth and development. The proper exploitation of the potentials of SWOT Analysis may offer opportunities towards the direction of a rather higher educational level provision.

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Paper

Introduction

Educational units constitute a considerably separate category of organisations due to the complexity they present compared to all other organisations. The fact that they belong to this particular category of organisations in general presupposes the urgent necessity to operate and even be administrated as effectively as possible so as to be in the position to achieve further advances of development. The process of their administration includes four certain separate phases, which are: programming-planning, organisation, leadership and controlling that are all common in every kind of organisation despite the category in which these organisations belong to. The difficulty of the principles that mark these phases is due to their adjustment to the facts and the peculiarities of the educational organisations, without however trying to marginalise all those special characteristics that are considered to be parts of the Greek educational system.

The phase of programming-planning

The first phase in the managerial process is planning. As Koutouzis (1999) claims, programming is considered to be the effort to control the future at the level of administrating operation. Moreover, as Saitis (2005) has pointed out, programming refers to the general context of a process or the sum of actions and training, execution and adjustment means of alternative programs of actions in an organisation.

As far as the action of an educational unit is concerned, it refers to the function of setting goals and objectives for the procedures according to which the educational, pedagogical and administrative activities of a school unit will be accomplished within a predefined time (Petridou, 2005).

The importance of programming-planning that concerns the level of educational units

The operation of programming is of crucial importance for an educational unit. It designates the route that particular kind of unit will pursue in the future, as it plays the role of a compass by determining the boundaries of the goals and by preparing the organisation to follow a certain direction (Athanassoula-Reppa et al., 1999). We can allege that eventually these goals express the mission of every organisation and what is prepared is actually the steps of the co-ordination that will lead to its effective operation through the achievement of its goals. A positive step towards this direction is considered to be the importance that is given to the harmonic co-operation of the organisation's members, surely without claddings of actions or waste of time in order the best possible outcome to be accomplished (Saitis, 2005).

The function of programming, however, demands increased caution since, according to Everard and Morris (1996), the goals of an organisation do not always seem to be in perfect harmony with one another. Generally speaking, the importance of programming refers to the potential that on one hand is provided so as the mission of the educational unit to be recognised, the educational act to be classified and the objectives to be defined, taking nevertheless into account its possibilities and weaknesses; on the other hand, programming is essential in order an orientation towards the approximation of goals to be kept (Xirotiri-Koufidou, 2000).

Strategic planning

Programming in educational units, as it systematically happens in all kinds of organisations, normally takes two possible forms. It may be either functional or strategic depending on the managing level that is implemented and the time horizon of the goals that are set in terms of its duration (Athanassoula-Reppa et al., 1999). Concerning the strategic planning, it constitutes a long-term planning, which does not focus on the separate operations of the organisation but on its total function (Koutouzis, 1999).

The necessity of that specific kind of planning is summed up in the quote "If you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else" (Raynor, 2004, p. 37). Consequently, it is generally thought that strategic planning concerns the long-term planning, which focuses on

the general orientation of the organisation and the designation of the long-term goals, taking into account the environment and the conditions in which the organisation operates.

Many organizations plan their strategy without going through a formal strategic planning process. For example, an ice hockey team starts its season with a basic strategy of how their organization will win as many games as possible and they do this without going through a formal strategic planning process. The team management considers the competitive environment and what the personnel's strengths and weaknesses are and then decide on a strategy concerning how they think they can maximize the team's chances for success (Linn, 2008). According to what has already been mentioned, there may be times when a full-blown strategic planning process is needed. For example, if it is required by those who oversee one's institution, then one should go through the process to mollify those in charge. In addition, having everybody go through the process may be what is needed to get the whole staff committed to putting their effort towards the same goal.

Strategic school planning

School planning has developed significantly over the last ten years with the universal acceptance of school development planning formats and approaches. However, the move to school-based management and greater autonomy has increased the need for schools to take on a wider planning role and responsibility. Referring to the educational units, strategic planning is the process of matching the school's activities to the current and emerging environment, bearing in mind what can feasibly be achieved with the resource base which can be generated (Davies & Ellison, 1998).

Filder (2002) distinguishes between three aspects of strategy:

- Strategy itself, which involves a strategic aim and a means to reach it.
- Strategic planning: a plan to put strategy into practice.
- Strategic management: implementing strategy.

The process of strategic planning can be seen to encompass three stages as articulated by Johnson and Scholes (1997) and thus to link into development planning:

- Strategic analysis.
- Strategic choice.
- Strategic implementation.

Planning in schools over the last two decades has been categorised in a number of ways. At both regional and national level, frameworks for planning have been produced, based on cycles of review, planning and implementation. At institutional level four different types of school plans could be identified (Bell, 2002):

- The rhetorical, which had no credibility within the school.
- The singular, produced by the principal alone.
- The co-operative, produced by a group of staff and focusing on finance and staff development.
- The corporate produced by the staff working together and focusing on an agreed range of the school's priorities.

The implementation of strategic planning becomes a reality through seven successive steps not only for school units but also for all kinds of organisations. The third one is the seeking of needs and presuppositions both of the external and the internal environment for each of the possible alternatives or the so called ‘SWOT Analysis’. As Raynor confirms (2004), the strategic process involves audits, environmental scanning, Swot analysis, and culture analysis in order to identify future trends.

SWOT Analysis

The conditions of operation of an organisation and even its external limitations may render some of the alternative solutions problematic or prohibitive in some cases (Athanasoula-Reppa et al., 1999). This may occur because each alternative solution or proposal presents different presuppositions or consequences. On the contrary, as Koutouzis claims (1999), the conditions of an organisation concern simultaneously not only its internal but also its external environment. Obviously, it would be naive for anybody to create a strategy for achieving a goal without taking into account the organization's strengths and weaknesses as well as the competitive environment (Linn, 2008).

The situation being like that, strategic management has not changed since its early inception, with SWOT (strengths /weaknesses /opportunities /threats) analysis serving as the fundamental methodology for formulating the firm's strategy (see Figure 1). The underlying premise in this approach is to match the firm's distinctive competencies and resources with the market to create a perfect match between the firm and the external environment and therein develop a sustainable competitive advantage (Miles and Snow, 1984).

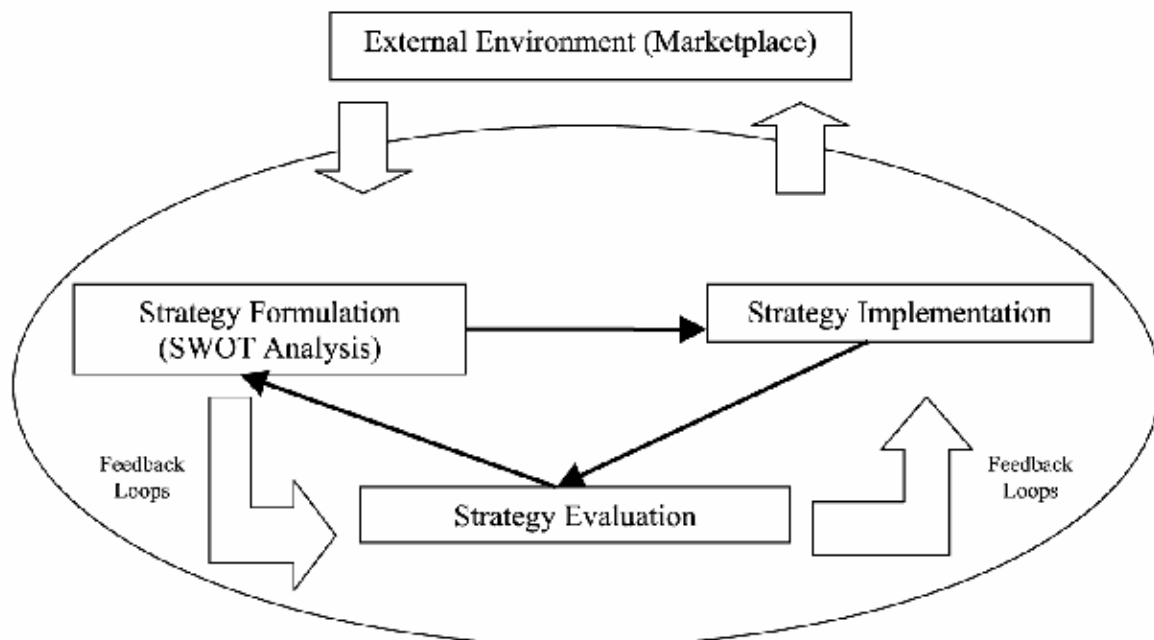


Figure 1: *The traditional strategic management process (Sherman, Rowley and Armandi, 2007: 166).*

Certainly, some of the concepts that various formal strategic planning processes use have value. For example, SWOT Analysis has one considering the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats given the basic goals that one wants to attain (Linn, 2008).

This specific analysis of the above factors known as SWOT Analysis –a term that comes from the acronyms of the words Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats- is regarded as an integral part of the strategic planning procedure, irrespective of its kind (Athanasoula-Reppa et al., 1999). The strong and the weak points of an organisation constitute factors of its internal environment while the opportunities and the threats are considered to be parts of its external environment. To be more specific, elements of the internal environment are the school administration, the place, the human resources, the audiovisual teaching means and the school number of students-teachers. On the contrary, factors that represent the external school environment are the general social, political, economic, cultural and technological forces and influences that are imposed in it (Saitis, 2007).

The attractions of SWOT Analysis are that this technique is familiar and easily understandable by users and it provides a good structuring device for sorting out ideas about the future and an organisation's ability to exploit that future. The reason why it has become so widely known is because of its inherent attractions, which are (Piercy & Giles, 1989):

- The technique is simple enough in concept to be immediately and readily accessible to managers –no computer or management expert is needed.
- The model can be used without extensive corporate or market information systems – but is flexible enough to incorporate these where appropriate.
- SWOT analysis provides us with a device to structure the awkward mixture of quantitative and qualitative information, of familiar and unfamiliar facts, of known and half-known understandings that marks strategic marketing planning.

In its most simplistic form, a SWOT analysis leads to one of four major conclusions (Sherman, Rowley and Armandi, 2007):

- Strengths outweigh weaknesses, opportunities outweigh threats – supports a growth strategy.
- Strengths outweigh weaknesses, threats outweigh opportunities – supports a maintenance strategy.
- Weaknesses outweigh strengths, opportunities outweigh threats – supports a harvest strategy.
- Weaknesses outweigh strengths, threats outweigh opportunities – supports a retrenchment strategy.

The basic results of a SWOT analysis can then be included in the organisation's or firm's profile and compared to the organisation's or firm's characteristics. This profile can then be compared to determine how well the firm is internally aligned as well as aligned with its SWOT analysis (Sherman, Rowley and Armandi, 2006).

The establishment of OEEK / IEK in Greece and the potentials of their strategic planning

In 1992 the Law 2009 was published, according to which the Organisation of Vocational Education and Training (OVET; OEEK) and the Institutes of Vocational Training (IVT; IEK) were set up. OEEK was charged with the establishment, organisation and operation of IEKs

(Zarifis, 2003). The main objective of these institutes was the initial or supplementary training for the improvement of the labour market and its productive process as well as the subsequent entrance of graduate students in it. In that way, IEKs supply students with all the abilities, knowledge and experience that are applicable and considerably necessary for the market in general (Mardas & Valkanos, 2002).

The institution of IEKs, however, despite the fact that it constitutes a form of life long education and training, is not regarded as a separate educational level, since it does not belong to any specific level of the Greek educational system (Saitis, 2007). On the other hand, however, the control that is exerted from the higher levels of managing hierarchy of the Greek educational system is by far less strict than that exerted to the organisations which belong to the other discreet levels of education, permitting them in that way to display potentials of flexibility, resulting in a substantially higher level of implementation of the strategic planning (Athanasoula-Reppa et al., 1999).

Consequently, the model of SWOT Analysis is of crucial importance for the Institutes of Vocational Training in Greece since, unlike other school units, they appear to be decentralised to a great extent from the higher authority of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. This fact inevitably leads to the argument that they are given the opportunity to exploit the advantages of strategic planning, as they seem to be in the privileged position to handle matters of either human or material resource management independently.

The SWOT analysis of the state IEK of Epanomi in Thessaloniki

The state institute of vocational training (IEK) in Epanomi is one of those institutes that are located outside the city of Thessaloniki. This fact creates increased responsibilities on behalf of the directors requiring their appropriate targeted steps that will lead to its further growth and development. The proper exploitation of the potentials of SWOT Analysis may offer opportunities towards the direction of a rather higher educational level provision.

Its operation started in 1993 in a building where the Vocational High School of Epanomi operates. For sixteen years this particular IEK offers training mostly to high school graduates. At first, specialties that belonged to the field of informatics and economy-administration were offered. Later on, it was activated in the fields of constructions and mass media production. Nowadays, there are specialties concerning the fields of health-aesthetics-social services and those of engineering-electricity.

In a period of an intense economic recession that a lot of values are in a state of doubt, it is considered interesting enough to examine the perspectives of the IEK of Epanomi for the designation of its future action and direction, taking into account both the strong and the weak points of its internal environment and also the opportunities and the threats of its external one (see Table 1).

The strengths of the IEK of Epanomi

The strongest point that concerns the internal environment of the IEK in Epanomi is related to the existence of the 'sound and image' laboratories that it possesses. They were fully

equipped in 2001 and during the school year 2001-2002 the first specialties dealing with sound and image were launched. At the end of the year 2007 the new equipment valued at almost three thousand euros was delivered. At the level of quality we could claim that this new equipment, taking for granted the quotes of the technicians who took on its installation, was equivalent to those that well-known music and movie firms afforded. Moving towards this direction, it is important to contemplate that only two state IEKs in Greece –the other one is the IEK of Haidari in Athens- dispose such a high level of equipment. Consequently, it can easily be understood that the IEK of Epanomi is able to offer a great deal of opportunities for high level studies to all those students in Northern Greece interested in specialties related to sound and image. Although these specialties are offered by some private IEKs in Thessaloniki, unfortunately, on the one hand these IEKs do not have equipment of such a high quality level and on the other hand the cost of each semester for a student exceeds by far the amount of the three hundred and sixty seven euros that state students have to pay. Quite indicative towards the status and the domination of IEK of Epanomi is the fact that the certification examinations for the specialties of both sound and image take place twice a year there, including all the IEKs' graduates, either state or private ones.

Another strong element that marks the IEK of Epanomi is that of the wide area in which it extends. It is the only IEK, including state or private ones, that encases four large municipalities within its boundaries, those of Epanomi, of Mikra, of Thermaikos and of Nea Michaniona. Additionally, the next IEK that is closer to it is the one in Thermi at a distance further than ten kilometres. Therefore, the IEK in Epanomi needs to confront and fulfil the needs for education and training of a considerably large number of students, which in fact means that it is expected to support the demands of the inhabitants via the specialties that are offered. The advantage of its easy approach –compared to any other IEK- by all these people who reside in the afore-mentioned municipalities is important and strategic to be utilised as a tool for the attraction of all the candidate students of these regions. The IEK of Epanomi should be considered in any case their first choice in any possible future study process that they may pursue.

The weaknesses of the IEK of Epanomi

The fact that the IEK of Epanomi belongs to the peripheral IEKs -due to its distance from the city of Thessaloniki- constitutes its weakest point as far as its internal environment is concerned. Even though it offers specialties that do not exist in other IEKs in Thessaloniki or in Northern Greece in general, the twenty-kilometre distance from the east end of the city operate quite unappealingly for some candidate students concerning the possibility of choosing this IEK for their future studies. As a result, it is extremely difficult –especially for those students who live or come from the west side of the city- to attend specialties at this IEK. It is likely that some students will get on three buses on their way to the IEK and other three on their way back home. This fact creates negative disposition and attitude towards this IEK on behalf of these students who, even though they are interested in some of the specialties that are offered in Epanomi, do not choose any of them for their studies due to the four-hour trip they have to take only for their transportation. This particular number of hours in combination with the average of five lesson hours a day appears to be a factor which operates against the attraction of students that live

downtown or even further. Unfortunately, quite similarly the educators of the IEK in Epanomi face this problematic situation in their attempt to approach this IEK, mostly those who do not travel by car.

Another problem which is regarded as a weak point for the IEK in Epanomi is the fact that most of the transferred civil servants there come from Thessaloniki. These people are very likely to be interested in a transfer at an IEK in the city for the next school year so that they can be closer to the place where they live without having to face the matter of distance. Consequently, a large number of them changes and is replaced by new ones every year, bringing about difficulties to the proper operation of this IEK, especially at the beginning of every school year. Furthermore, the impression created in the mind of some civil servants about their future move to another IEK closer to the place of their interest, makes them express a rather lower level of job commitment without feeling any obligation to show their abilities and work hard in order all the matters that concern that IEK to be arranged properly.

The opportunities of the IEK of Epanomi

There are some opportunities of the external environment of the IEK in Epanomi considering that of the wide housing construction in the region spread in all these municipalities as the most important one. The rapid growth of population leads to a greater demand for new specialties according to the needs that come up in these regions every day. As a result, it is important for the new conditions to be examined and analysed so as to attract students who, after having finished their studies, will be in the advantageous position to staff the small and the middle enterprises not only of these municipalities but also of the other regions that belong to the same prefecture, using their high level of knowledge they acquired during their studies' period.

Another opportunity for this IEK is the possibility of further exploitation of the 'music and sound' laboratories by starting the operation of new specialties such as that of the 'Electrical Image Operator-Monter'. It is possible that a desirable cooperation with music-image producers can be achieved so as the graduates to be able to find a job after having completed their studies, taking into account that the IEK in Epanomi can offer a high level of education and training because of the fully equipped laboratories that it owns. Music production companies and some local radio and TV stations may build a bridge of communication and cooperation with this IEK, having as their central focus the creation of a high quality provision level of image and sound abilities. Finally, the invitation addressed to other IEKs for cooperation within the wider European area will give it the potential to increase its merit and empower its position.

The threats of the IEK of Epanomi

The largest threat the IEK of Epanomi faces is the fact that it belongs to the peripheral IEKs in the prefecture of Thessaloniki. It is considered to be a less significant one because it is located outside the city. On the contrary, more attention is paid to the operation of the other IEKs inside the city whose demands for new specialties are much easier fulfilled. A larger number of students, educators and administering staff shows factual interest for these IEKs

resulting in the more intense level of attention on behalf of the central management of OEEK. Moreover, any possibility for future decrease of interest for training on behalf of the candidate students may lead to the abolition or even amalgamation of some IEKs, placing those outside the city in the zone with the highest level of danger and unsure evolution.

Another important threat is that of transportation inside the city of Thessaloniki, which is expected to get better due to the imminent completion of the underground construction works. The transportation inside the city will surely become much easier during the next five years, empowering the IEKs that belong to this region and decreasing the impact to a great extent of the peripheral ones. The approach to those IEKs which are situated outside the city will remain a problematic situation for students, educators and staff while the city IEKs will be in the advantageous position to get approached quicker and also more comfortably via an abundance of transportation means. In such a case, the IEKs inside the city will appear to be a much better proposal and convenient solution to all those people who are interested in the technical training field, as the time required to reach them will be significantly reduced.

The IEK in Themi obviously constitutes an additional form of threat for the one in Epanomi, since it is almost twofold as far as the number of its students and staff is concerned. It is considered as one of the three biggest IEKs in the prefecture of Thessaloniki, imposing a pressure that inevitably turns much of the attention of OEEK on it. It is always a step ahead in the fulfilment of the proposals for new specialties and it is quite usual for its directors to ask for the introduction of specialties that already operate in Epanomi. This matter is regarded in any case harmful for the possibility of attracting students and ‘competing’ new specialties for the IEK in Epanomi. Additionally, we should also take into account the fact that the IEK in Themi fulfils the needs of plenty of municipalities as well, which seem to have a high level of structuring growth.

Finally, the general problem that nowadays Education in Greece faces is another threat for the IEK in Epanomi. We refer to the increase of the number of the high school students who pass the examinations for entering universities in Greece. The more this particular number of entrants increases, the less is the number of those high school graduates who are interested in the field of technical education and training at IEKs. As a result, no adequate number of candidate students-applicants expresses interest at least for some specialties in the IEK in Epanomi, whereas this specialty is likely to start its operation in another central IEK in the city. This fact leads in the long run to the decrease of the number of specialties in the IEK in Epanomi.

Table 1: *The SWOT Analysis of the IEK of Epanomi.*

	<i>Strong Points</i>	<i>Weak Points</i>
INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The existence of the fully equipped ‘sound and image’ laboratories • The wide area in which it extends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It belongs to the peripheral IEKs in the prefecture of Thessaloniki • Most of the transferred civil servants there come from the city of Thessaloniki

	<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide housing construction in the region spread in all these municipalities around this IEK • The possibility of further exploitation of the ‘music and sound’ laboratories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The future expression of less interest for IEKs that belong to the peripheral ones in the prefecture of Thessaloniki • Transportation inside the city of Thessaloniki is expected to get better after the imminent completion of the subway construction works • The IEK of Themi • The increase of the number of the high school students who become university students in Greece

Conclusions

As has already been mentioned, strategic planning occurs in the upper levels of hierarchy in an organisation. Unfortunately, things are quite different in Greece concerning the educational units. Greek state schools do not seem to be in the position to conform their own strategy. Thus, they cannot implement strategic goals, for instance, the change in curricula, the gradual decrease of the proportion between a teacher and students, the introduction of the new technologies or maybe of innovative forms in education. These long-term strategic plans are decided in the upper levels of the Greek system’s managerial hierarchy, whereas schools are just required to implement them through a series of administrative processes (Athanasoula-Reppa et al., 1999).

Therefore, the centralisation that marks the Greek educational system affects straightforwardly the process of programming in schools, while at the same time it provokes consequences to these organisations that supply students with training or further education. However, as far as organisations of vocational training and life long education are concerned, these limitations appear to be of a minor extent, leaving major possibilities for the substantial implementation of strategic planning with fewer commitments from the central administration and a frame of autonomy and independence concerning their operation and management and even the strategic goals of the unit in general (Athanasoula-Reppa et al., 1999). The directors of these organisations present increased potentials in the field of strategic planning concerning mostly the matter of organizing both the human and the remainder resources of an organisation, the motivation and coaching - guidance of the staff and also the other procedures of control (Koutouzis, 1999).

Inevitably, strong centralized leadership must make a commitment to change. At the same time, a degree of autonomy is necessary for local institutions because quality is as much a result of characteristics unique to each institution as it is a result of centralized policies and procedures (Herschbach, 1997). The distinguishing potential that marks the IEKs in terms with which they

are capable of offering specialties in accordance with the local or not market needs and on the base of their technological-material substratum and standards constitutes an essential fact that in any case places them in a powerful position against the schools which belong to the first or the second level of the educational system in Greece. What's more, their flexibility and participation not only in matters of economic administration –such as the educators' payroll, the operation expenses and the educational material purchase- but also in matters dealing with human resource management –such as that of hiring teaching staff according to the teaching needs of the existing specialties- increases to a great extent their level of autonomy and freedom, without them being subjected to the extreme pressure of the Greek central authority.

The IEK of Epanomi, in particular, appears to have a significant consignment for the future, as it presents strong points that concern its equipment and place, despite the fact that there exists some difficulty on the students' part in approaching it, which is certainly a discouraging factor both for them but also for the educators and the staff. However, the opportunity of the wide housing structure of the regions which surround this IEK and even the one of the further exploitation of the modern laboratories of 'sound and image' are thought to be exceptionally important factors for their perspective development. There are, on the other hand, some significant threats, which undermine its development and are related to the possible decrease of the future students' expressing interest for vocational training. Furthermore, the visible threat that comes from the completion of the subway works, which is expected during the next five years, will reduce the required time to reach the IEKs inside the city, resulting in the inevitable undermining of the demand for studies in the peripheral IEKs. Finally, the IEK of Thermi constitutes another instance of an imminent threat but the most essential one of all is thought to be the dramatic decrease in the number of candidate students that are interested in the field of vocational training at IEKs, due to the massive entrance in the upper grade of the Greek educational system.

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