

ORIENTATION AND BRIEFING OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION COMMITTEE (EEC) KEY POINTS

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GENERAL

- The Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA) is the competent authority in Cyprus for ensuring the quality of higher education.
- The Agency was established in November 2015. It is a public organization, fully independent in processes and decisions which are all based on CYQAA's law.
- In 2019, the CYQAA became a full member of ENQA (The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). Henceforth, European standards are applied onto the CYQAA policies and European guidelines are followed (ESG).
- Amongst other competencies, the CYQAA conducts institutional, departmental and programmatic evaluations and, according to the experts' reports, the Agency decides in favour of accreditation, rejection or a second evaluation.
- In Cyprus' higher education sector, programmes of study are offered by 8 universities (3 public and 5 private) and 45 higher education schools (colleges, non-university). The operation of each programme of study is not permitted unless it has received programmatic evaluation/accreditation, which is repeated every five (5) years.
- Cyprus has fully adopted the Bologna Process and thus CYQAA operates in accordance with its guidelines. Consequently, 1st (Bachelor), 2nd (Master) and 3rd cycle (PhD) degrees are offered. In addition, short-cycle degrees are offered by higher education schools (non-university) only.

- According to Cyprus Law:

Cycle	Degree	Duration	ECTS
Short-cycle	Certificate	1 year	60
	Diploma	2 years	120
	Higher Diploma	3 years	180
1 st	Bachelor	4 years minimum	240
2 nd	Master	1 year, 1½ 2 years	90 or 120
3 rd	PhD	3 years minimum	it varies

External Evaluation Committees are expected to consult the ECTS Guide and to verify the correspondence of the programme under evaluation with the academic requirements of each level.

- According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which is a common European reference framework whose purpose is to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems, the CYQAA adopts and applies the descriptors defining the eight (8) reference levels indicating the relevant learning outcomes. **The EEC should examine whether the content and the delivery of the programme, as well as students' assessments, correspond to the EQF. Special attention should be given to the Master level's correspondence to the EQF.**

<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>

- According to the legislation, members of the EEC are academics from different countries in Europe, with one university student from a public university in Cyprus and a member of the professional association, responsible for giving the license to operate the specific occupation (for regulated occupations only). In addition, an expert on distance learning methodology is also appointed as a member of the EEC on the evaluation of a distance learning programme.

In institutional evaluations two additional members join the committee, an expert on building and technological infrastructures and an expert on student welfare services. All members of the EEC are equal in terms of expressing their ideas and equitably contributing to the writing of the experts' report.

PROCESS

The evaluation process includes four phases:

- Application for evaluation accompanied by institution's/department's/programme's self-evaluation study.
- The external evaluation, which is carried out with the contribution of a panel of independent experts selected by the Agency. This process includes, in particular, the study of the application and of the self-study, a site-visit and the writing of the experts' report.
- The institution's response. The experts' evaluation report is sent to the institution for its response, including the actions taken for compliance and the action plan drawn up and implemented by the institution. Compliance may need to be verified by the experts' panel.
- The Council's decision for accreditation/rejection or second evaluation.
- Based on the HEI's application for evaluation and the site visit conducted at the HEI, the EEC completes the external evaluation report the day after the site visit is conducted. The EEC completes one report for each programme of study under evaluation in the case of programmatic evaluation.
- According to the relevant legislation, the HEI is given a period of up to 3 months to respond to the EEC's comments on the external evaluation report, and to make the necessary amendments.
- The indicative site visit schedule is prepared by the CYQAA and it is sent to the EEC and the HEI before the evaluation. The EEC, within its competencies, may amend the schedule in ways it sees fit for the unobstructed conduct of the external evaluation.

- On the basis of the external evaluation report, the recommendations of the EEC and the HEI's response on the external evaluation report, the Council of CYQAA decides whether a programme of study/department/institution a) must be accredited, b) must be rejected or c) a second evaluation should be carried out. The experts' opinion/advice for compliance or not may be asked before the decision.
- Suggestions for improvement may be included in the Agency's final report and a follow-up process should be activated based on a timely flexible action plan submitted by the HEI. From that point of view, evaluation against standards is always considered a process of improvement.
- A process of appeals is provided by the legislation: The institution may, within one (1) month from the receipt of the final report of the Agency, submit an appeal/raise an objection requesting its review by the Agency, stating the grounds which, in its opinion, justify the withdrawal and the review of the evaluation report. The appeal's examination by the Agency shall be carried out based on the data contained in the evaluation file of the institution and the grounds set out in the objection in order to issue a relevant decision. An amendment of the legislation provides that the Council may assign an ad hoc advisory committee to examine the appeal before the final decision by the Agency.
- The decisions of the CYQAA are subject to appeals to the court.

REPORTS REGARDING THE EVALUATION PROCESS

- As a full member of ENQA, the content of CYQAA's reports is in agreement with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).
- All the forms used for the process of evaluation reflect the stakeholders' observations, the experts' feedback, possible restrictions provided by the legislation's framework, and the ESG. The forms' review process takes place regularly every two years.
- The HEI completes the 'Application Form for External Evaluation' (Doc. 200.1/Doc. 200.2/Doc. 200.3). The HEI's application and other relevant material are sent to the members of the EEC approximately one month before the site visit. The material is also provided to the members of the EEC in print on the day of the site visit.
- The EEC completes the 'External Evaluation Report' (Doc. 300.1.1). A printed copy of the report is delivered to the CYQAA the day after it is completed, after being signed by all members of the EEC. An electronic pdf copy is sent by the chair of the committee to the responsible CYQAA officer without signatures, in order to be uploaded on CYQAA's web site with all other related documents.
- The HEI completes the 'Higher Education Institution's Response' (Doc. 300.1.2).
- The EEC is asked for feedback on document 'Feedback from EEC Experts' (Doc. 300.1.3).

CONTENT OF REPORTS (DOCS. 300)

<http://www.dipae.ac.cy/index.php/en/evaluation-en/forms-en>

Doc. 300.1.1

- The external evaluation report follows the structure of assessment areas, with standards which are relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and some guiding questions that the EEC may find useful.
- Under each assessment area, the EEC must provide feedback regarding the degree of compliance with the requirements. In particular, the EEC is expected to write findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations.
- Specifically, for each assessment area there are quality indicators (criteria) to be scored by the EEC on a scale from one (1) to five (5), based on the degree of compliance. The scale used is explained below:
 - 1 or 2: Non-compliant
 - 3: Partially compliant
 - 4 or 5: Compliant
- The EEC must justify the numerical scores provided for the quality indicators (criteria) by specifying (if any) the deficiencies, and explain qualitatively according to international standards. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the justification of the numerical score which follows below each section of the criteria must be in agreement with the score given, as well as the findings, areas of improvement and recommendations written in the report.
- The EEC should state the overall compliance for each assessment area, which must be in agreement with everything stated and scored in the report.
- Appropriateness of the admission criteria, including the threshold of enrolment, must also be examined in all the programmes of the 8 levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

- The EEC should state the conclusions and final remarks regarding the programme of study as a whole.
- Also, particular attention should be paid to the standards regarding the e-learning programmes, the doctoral programmes and joint programmes of study. The standards can be found in the External Evaluation Report (Doc. 300.1.1), in the particular section.

E-learning programmes

- Regarding the distance learning programmes, particular attention should be paid to the degree to which the programme, the material, the facilities and the guidelines safeguard the interaction between students, students and instructors, students and material.
- The coordinator of the programme should be a member of permanent staff, able to provide evidence on how this interaction is ensured and how it is assessed. He or she should also be able to provide the number of students who upload their work and discuss it in the platform during a semester (log-in data).
- It is also important to evaluate the quality of the study guides, which must follow the CYQAA instructions.
<http://www.dipae.ac.cy/index.php/en/news-and-events/announcements/298-2017-09-13-criteria-and-quality-indicators-for-distance-learning-programmes-of-study-number-2>
- The EEC should check the number of teaching staff and whether the number of permanent staff ensures the provision of higher quality education, as well as the sustainability of the programme.
- The qualifications of the instructors for teaching an e-learning programme should also be examined, as well as their level of training.

- The EEC should take into consideration the number of modules/courses offered in the programme and that the workload of each instructor, for all the programmes in which he/she is involved, should not exceed 9 periods per week, and consequently 3 audiences of maximum 30 students. That means that for each audience the programme needs a minimum of 4 to 5 instructors, a number that should be multiplied by the number of audiences (i.e., 95 students, 4 audiences, 20 instructors, including the adequate number of permanent staff).
- Finally, the EEC members should provide evidence in the external evaluation report in regard to the nature of the programme and whether it is compatible with e-learning delivery. A well-developed DL structure should be in place based on the philosophical foundations of distance learning, and it must be ensured that e-learning programmes are not considered “easy” or “independent studies”.

Joint programmes

- The EEC should examine whether the partner universities apply joint internal quality assurance processes and if the programme is offered jointly, involving all cooperating universities in the design, delivery and further development of the programme.
- The terms and conditions of the joint programme are laid down in a cooperation agreement which is available for examination by the EEC’s experts.
- The EEC examines the organisation of mobility of students and teaching staff, and it verifies that mobility is ensured and provides rewarding experiences (which are evaluated by the experts).
- Finally, the added value of the joint programme is explained and recommendations for improvement are provided.

Doc. 300.1.2

- The HEI responds within a time period of 3 months to the EEC’s comments on each assessment area of the external evaluation report.

Doc. 300.1.3

- The EEC is asked via email for feedback on this document. The CYQAA Officer completes the part with the EEC recommendations and HEI's response before sending the document to the EEC for feedback.

FEEDBACK ON CYQAA's PROCESSES

- The EEC completes a questionnaire on the quality of the CYQAA processes.

FINAL POINTS

- The HEI prepares the application form based on the template provided by the CYQAA. This is sent to the EEC members prior to the evaluation in order to be reviewed and for the experts to be well-prepared before the evaluation. If the EEC believes that extra information regarding the programme of study is needed, then it is the members' responsibility to ask for it during the site visit. For example, the EEC may ask for teaching materials, sample papers, presentations of lectures, access to online platforms etc.
- Following the policy of the CYQAA, HEIs in Cyprus should offer ONLY quality programmes of study, which must be favorably compared to the programmes of higher education institutions overseas, and especially of European Higher Education Institutions.
- HEIs have the opportunity through their responses to correct what emerges from the EEC report, so the EEC members should be objective and make fruitful recommendations on which the Council of the CYQAA can safely base its decisions.
- EEC members are expected to implement the European Standards and Guidelines and evaluate objectively and in relation to the best programmes they have in mind, based on their expertise and international experience. At the same time, they are expected to acknowledge national differences in the educational programmes, which in any case must not endanger the universal and national mission of the HEIs and of the European Higher Education Area.