Doc. 300.3.2

Higher Education Institution's Response

(Departmental)

Date: Date

- **Higher Education Institution:** University of Cyprus
- **Town:** Aglantzia, Nicosia
- **School/Faculty: Pure and Applied Sciences**
- **Department: Biological Sciences**
- **Programme(s) of study under evaluation Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)**

Programme 1

In Greek:

ΠΤΥΧΙΟ ΒΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΩΝ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΩΝ

In English:

BACHELOR IN BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Programme 2

In Greek:

ΜΑΣΤΕΡ ΣΤΗ ΒΙΟΠΟΙΚΙΛΟΤΗΤΑ ΚΑΙ ΟΙΚΟΛΟΓΙΑ

In English:

MASTER IN BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGY

Programme 3

In Greek:

ΔΙΔΑΚΤΟΡΙΚΟ ΣΤΗ ΒΙΟΠΟΙΚΙΛΟΤΗΤΑ ΚΑΙ ΟΙΚΟΛΟΓΙΑ

In English:

DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY IN BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGY

- **Department's Status: Currently Operating**

The present document has been prepared within the framework of the authority and competencies of the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, according to the provisions of the "Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education and the Establishment and Operation of an Agency on Related Matters Laws" of 2015 to 2021 [L.136(I)/2015 – L.132(I)/2021].

A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.3.1) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the department in each assessment area.*

- *In particular, under each assessment area, the HEI must respond on, without changing the format of the report:*

    - *the findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
    - *the deficiencies noted under the quality indicators (criteria)*
    - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*

- *The HEI's response must follow below the EEC's comments, which must be copied from the external evaluation report (Doc. 300.3.1).*

- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

1. Department's academic profile and orientation

Sub-areas

1.1 Mission and strategic planning
1.2 Connecting with society
1.3 Development processes

1.1 Mission and strategic planning

Findings

The Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus has established a broad profile and orientation, particularly strong in fundamental biosciences, which is highly valued at the BSc level. Its capacity to address diverse fields of international relevance is a notable strength, reflecting the department's commitment to maintaining a competitive edge in the global biosciences landscape.

We thank the committee for these overall positive comments that underline our department's efforts to maintain high quality in research and education.

The department shows a clear awareness of the need to expand into emerging disciplines. Strategic recruitment of new staff in key areas is a priority, which is expected to enhance its ability to meet the demands of both national and international contexts. One such area is the Biomedical Engineering Research Center, where the department has demonstrated a vision to contribute to new structures and profile areas, despite the challenges posed by limited resources.

Indeed, we aim to expand into new disciplines and bring our department at international levels in terms of academic staff numbers and diversity, an effort that was hindered for a long time by the lack of available lab space. This obstacle will be removed soon by our moving into the new building. Therefore, we shall make all efforts to convince our administration for the need to offer us more academic staff positions in the near future. Our department, within its limited human resources, aims to further enhance its scope in key areas at the forefront of science by participating in inter-disciplinary initiatives in both research and education. The new legislative regulations expected in the next few months, which will allow public universities to offer undergraduate courses in English, will provide further opportunities to expand such collaborations with other departments and participate in more interdisciplinary initiatives. In addition to the Biomedical Engineering Research Center and the respective minor programme in 'Biomedical Engineering', our department is already participating in the MSc programme in 'Biomedical Research' with the Medical School of UCY, and several of its members have active collaborations with colleagues from other departments and schools, as well as other academic and research institutes in Cyprus, as can be seen also in their publication record.

The department has a keen understanding of the importance of aligning its profile with timely and attractive topics at both the national and regional/international levels. It has clearly identified gaps in its current offerings and the steps necessary for further development. For example, efforts to strengthen the public and private sector interface, particularly in health and environmental themes, show the department's forward-thinking approach to positioning itself as a key player in these areas.

We thank the committee for identifying these strong points of our department.

The department's involvement in the YUFE (Young Universities for the Future of Europe) network is a testament to its adaptability and readiness for change, ensuring it remains connected with European partners. However, there is room for improvement in terms of showcasing its strengths more visibly to attract international students. While the department's current mission statement is effective in appealing to local BSc students, a more targeted and timely reflection of its unique strengths could assist in drawing a larger international audience across all programmes and retaining local students throughout their studies.
We have already taken action to improve the mission statement of our department in our website, and the relevant departmental committee is working new texts that will be uploaded before the end of February 2025.

The department is also encouraged to continue to develop synergies with other universities, particularly public institutions, research centers, and NGOs. Collaborations across research and teaching would provide additional opportunities for growth and innovation.
Indeed, we are collaborating with several such institutes and other organizations in joint research projects and will continue to pursue such collaborations in the future. Although such collaborations in teaching are more complex in terms of logistics, we shall continue inviting colleagues for seminars and lectures, as we have done in the past.

Despite its successes, there are still some challenges to address. Ecology and biodiversity are being recognized as fields with growing job prospects, and the department has made strong efforts to demonstrate the potential career paths for students in these areas. However, the department currently has a disproportionate number of professors in molecular biology compared to ecology and evolution, and with plant biology being generally underrepresented. Although this issue has been acknowledged and will be partially addressed through an upcoming faculty hire, in plant ecology and global change, it remains a significant area for development. The department is encouraged to recruit more professors in complementary domains to strengthen its research in ecology and evolution and to ensure collaboration and prevent isolated research efforts. Such new hires should also align with the new master's programme to maintain a cohesive academic structure.
We agree with the committee on the need to hire more academics in the general field of 'ecology and evolution' but also in other complementary domains. To fulfill this target, though, we need to see a change in the current position allocation policy of UCY and convince administration for the need to increase the numbers of staff in our department. We make continuous efforts towards this goal. This restriction notwithstanding, we aim to enhance the 'ecology and evolution' component in any opportunity given by attracting high quality academics to increase attractiveness of the field to students and secure more funding from competitive programs. The description of new such positions in a way that invites researchers at the forefront of scientific research is the first step towards achieving this aim, and we have decided (Dept. Council 11/12/24) to incorporate this commitment explicitly in the new 5-year strategic plan that will be drafted in the spring semester of 2025. Nevertheless, we need to stress that the original plan on which our department has been founded and developed till today has explicitly described the 'ecology' component as one out of several others that are included under the broad category of 'molecular biology', so the disproportionate number of professors is, to some extent, desirable.

Strengths

The broad profile and orientation in fundamental biosciences is valued highly at the BSc student level
The department has the capacity to address major and diverse fields of international relevance
There is an awareness of the need to cover emerging disciplines and profile areas through appropriate recruitments of staff and a clear identification of gaps to further develop the department
The opening of a plant biology and global change professorship is a welcome event. The department is encouraged to recruit more professors in complementary domains to ensure that there is a clear interface/collaboration possible with existing academics (to avoid single/isolated research). These should be in line with the new master orientation.
We thank the committee for identifying the strengths of the department. Regarding the complementarity of domains among department's academics, we should stress that the small size of our department, coupled with the small number of incoming students due to the country's size, does not allow the establishment of larger groups in each field. Nevertheless, in our limited capacity, given the very low recruitment rate possible due to the scarcity of new positions offered to our department, we try to strengthen fields in which we are strong (e.g., evolution, molecular ecology) and, to some extent, fill important gaps in fields at the forefront of research (e.g., see the new position opened in the field of climate change).

There is a vision for how to contribute to new structures and profile areas, such as the biomedical engineering research center, despite lack of provision of additional resources
Yes, we do our best to contribute to such structures within the limits of available resources, as can be seen by our collaboration with research centers such as the Biomedical Engineering one mentioned by the committee, but also the Oceanographic Center and the UCY Biodiversity Center, which is currently under development.

The department clearly reflects on its profile and orientation in the context of timeliness and attractiveness, both at the national and regional/international level
The department has a vision for both how to interact with public and private sectors in the context of health and environmental issues
Indeed, we have established close contact and collaboration with several agencies and private institutes active in these fields, providing expertise and promoting human and environmental health.

There are strong current efforts and requirements to demonstrate ecology/biodiversity is an area with job prospects nationally and internationally
There is a readiness for changes/ show adaptability in the growing context of UCY.
The department is networked with other European universities through YUFE.
We thank the committee for these comments. We shall continue adding to the strengths of the department in both teaching and research.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The department might need to better or more visibly display and communicate its strengths to the outside.

We have undertaken concrete actions to enhance visibility and advertisement of the department's strengths, such as regularly adding new achievements and activities to our official website, buying services for media advertisement, etc., and we take advantage of all opportunities to communicate our strengths to the public in collaboration with the respective administrative offices (e.g., the Communications and Public Relations Office), evidenced by our active participation in promotion activities (videos, podcasts, press releases, etc.). However, we shall make even more efforts in the future, inviting also our alumni and graduate students to participate.

The overall "mission statement" is fairly generic, considering the explicit strengths displayed in profile and orientation. While this will apparently not affect the intake of local BSc students, it is felt that a more timely description, reflecting the particular strength of the department, might potentially assist in attracting additional MSc and Phd students from abroad, in all programs offered, and in retaining local students to progress from BSc to MSc.

The 'mission statement' on our website is scheduled to be revised soon to better reflect the strengths and profile of the department. This will be done in conjunction with the revision of our biodiversity-related postgraduate programmes (evaluated by this committee) and of our biomedicine-related postgraduate programmes (application for external evaluation has been submitted), as well as improvements of our undergraduate programme. The deadline for the 'mission statement' revision has been set to the end of February 2025, as decided by the Dept. Council (on 11/12/24). This will be available to the prospective postgraduate candidates of the next call (on March, for students starting in September 2025).

The department is encouraged to develop synergies with other universities, particularly public ones, and all possible relevant research centers and NGOs, in the both research and teaching.

We have already developed such synergies with public universities (e.g., *Technological Univ. of Cyprus*), research centers (e.g., *Cyprus Cancer Research Institute, Karaiskakio Foundation*) and NGOs (e.g., *Terra Cypria, Birdlife, Enalia Physis*) especially in terms of theses' supervision and students' training. It should be noted, though, that the size of the country sets limits to the numbers of such collaborations. Hence, we have also established synergies with Greek institutes but these are limited mostly by financial issues due to limited funds for mutual exchanges of staff and students.

There are still only a few professors in the fields of ecology and evolution, compared to molecular biology. This issue is recognised and will be partially addressed with upcoming positions but more needs to be done to recruit excellent ecologists and evolutionary biologists

We are indeed aware of the imbalance between 'ecology/evolution' and 'molecular biology' general fields in the department, which is part of the department's founding plan. Nevertheless, we aim to enhance these fields via more calls for new staff in the future, as long as the UCY administration allocates new academic positions to our department. We will also follow an even stricter selection procedure based on a more solid description of the positions in the respective calls to invite applications of the best possible candidates in cutting-edge research fields. As explained above, this commitment will be incorporated into the new 5-year strategic plan of the department (due May 2025).

Plant biology is poorly represented with only a single professor working on plants. New hires working on plants would substantially strengthen the department.

We have already opened one academic staff position in the field of plant biology, more specifically 'plant ecology and climate change', that is expected to be filled in the next year (2025). The limited number of positions available for new hires at the UCY, and more specifically for our department, does not allow for further development of each specific field. Nevertheless, positions that will open in the general field of ecology and evolution in the future years will also invite applications of experts in plants.

2. Quality Assurance

Sub-areas

2.1 System and quality assurance strategy
2.2 Quality assurance for the programmes of study

Findings

The Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus demonstrates a strong commitment to quality assurance, with clear evidence of efforts by departmental staff to ensure high standards across all levels of teaching, training, and research. The evaluation and training programmes are well-structured, with efficient measures in place to regularly assess and improve the quality of teaching. These processes allow for continuous reflection on the quality of training modules through dialogue between lecturing staff and the chair of the department, providing clear avenues for feedback and necessary adjustments.

We thank the committee for the encouraging words. Indeed, we value teaching quality very highly and we try to continuously improve our performance. Each Chair has access to students' evaluation of courses by the end of each semester and works with teaching staff in cases of issues raised. This is an on-going process, and each Chair can have access to past evaluations too to get a better picture of teaching performance.

The department's strategic focus on maintaining quality extends to future recruitment plans, particularly in areas such as Biotechnology and Plant Ecology. These planned hires will further enhance the breadth and depth of the department's training programmes, ensuring that its academic offerings remain comprehensive and up-to-date with current scientific developments.

We thank the committee for recognizing our efforts in these areas. We need to note that the most recent hire in our department has been in the field of Biotechnology and Plant Biology, whereas the new position to be fulfilled in 2025 is in the field of Plant Ecology.

Involving students in quality assurance processes is another strength of the department, with structures in place that allow for active student participation in maintaining high academic standards. External stakeholders consistently report that graduates from the department are not only of very high quality but also demonstrate strong critical thinking skills. This positive external feedback reinforces the perception that the department upholds a high academic standard, further enhancing the prestige and reputation of its programmes. This strong reputation allows the department to attract top-tier students at the BSc level, which is a significant asset.

At the BSc training level, the department is also exploring the possibility of integrating more biology themed exercises into courses imported from other disciplines, such as mathematics, physics, or chemistry. This would ensure that interdisciplinary modules align more closely with the department's biological focus, thereby enhancing the relevance of these courses for biosciences students.

We thank the committee for these comments and reassure its members that our department remains committed to quality assurance at all levels. We have already discussed with colleagues teaching Physics to make adjustments of the course's contents to the needs of our students and will continue our efforts with tutors of chemistry and mathematics. Nevertheless, we must pinpoint that the content of such courses is defined by the respecting teaching staff in view of the audience composition, which often includes students from other departments.

One area for potential improvement relates to the two-year turnover in the chair's role. This relatively short tenure can impair the longer-term feedback and guidance needed to enhance training modules and courses that might occasionally receive lower student evaluation results. A peer mentoring system could be explored as a possible solution, where feedback is passed to the incoming chair to ensure continuity in the improvement process. This would help maintain the focus on long-term quality development, ensuring that any issues identified are addressed in a sustainable manner.
As we explain below, the two-year turnover in chair's role is mandated by national law for UCY. Nevertheless, students' evaluations of courses and teaching staff remain available to new chairs, and a peer mentoring system has been already established by UCY at a voluntary basis for new academic staff members. We may have failed to make these clear to the committee.

Strengths
There is very clear evidence that departmental staff strive to ensure quality at all levels
The evaluation of training programmes is well structured and efficient measure to assess quality in teaching and training
There are processes in place to reflect on the quality of training modules between lecturing staff and dean, with avenues for providing feedback
The quality in breadth and depth of the training programmes is considered in planned future recruitments in the direction of Biotechnology and Plant Ecology
There are structures in place that allow student participation in maintaining high quality standards
There was clear evidence from an external stakeholder that students graduating are of very high quality and are critical thinkers. The academic standard of the department is also considered to be very high.
The programmes offered by the department have very high prestige and excellent reputation, which is a great asset that allows to select for the best student and talents at BSc entry level.
We thank the committee for the comments and we provide more concrete measures to further improve all these points below.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Student evaluations flagged that imported training courses and modules for the BSc should be more relevant for biology. Courses in mathematics, physics and chemistry could be improved through the inclusion of more exercises relevant to biological problems.
We are in constant communication with the teaching staff of courses offered by other departments to adjust their content to our students' needs. The more recent such improvement has been achieved for Physics, with more focused content already in place in the current semester. Of course, such adjustments depend also on the scope of each course as set by the teaching staff offering it, as well as the diversity of the course's audience; it should be noted that some imported courses offered to biological sciences students often include students from other departments too (i.e., from chemistry).

The two year turnaround in the chair makes it challenging to track over time evaluations of training modules and courses that might occasionally not achieve very high evaluation results. It might be a possibility to assess, through the chair, if a peer mentoring scheme could be introduced in such cases, or if reports can be passed to the next incoming chair.

We probably failed to make clear to the committee that each incoming Chair gains access to course evaluations of all previous semesters. In addition, UCY has established a peer-mentoring scheme for new academic members on a voluntary basis, but we should note that the vast majority of our department's staff is of higher ranks so that such a scheme cannot really be efficiently applied.

3. Administration

Findings

The administrative and technical support staff in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus appear highly motivated, demonstrating a strong identification with the department. There is a notably high level of satisfaction among staff in terms of collegiality and the overall working atmosphere, which contributes positively to the department's operations.
However, several concerns regarding staff remuneration and career progression were identified during the evaluation. It appears that administrative and accounting staff are carrying workloads and solving tasks that exceed what is typically expected at their pay scale. Moreover, staff performing similar tasks in central administration reportedly earn substantially more, which creates an imbalance and risks undermining morale. The lack of promotion opportunities due to a capping of the pay scale for these positions presents a serious challenge. This situation poses a significant risk of losing highly qualified and enthusiastic staff, which could have a detrimental impact on the department's functioning.
It is strongly recommended that the university leadership reviews this situation to explore options for addressing the pay disparities and career stagnation. One possible solution would be to swap these positions with potentially vacant ones that allow for career progression. Such adjustments would help retain key staff members who are essential to the department's success.
We are in full agreement with the committee on these points and have already made efforts to promote such requests to our administration.

There is also potential to support laboratory technical staff in further developing their skill sets. Encouraging staff to attend trainee programmes or participate in international training opportunities, such as through ERASMUS Plus, would enhance their capabilities and allow them to acquire new skills and techniques. This could be a valuable investment in maintaining the department's competitiveness in teaching and research.
Nevertheless, there is a general impression that the number of laboratory technical staff is significantly below international standards. This limitation hinders the department's ability to fully realize its potential for international competitiveness in both teaching and research excellence.
We agree with the points raised by the committee that will be used as further arguments in favor of our requests to UCY administration for more such positions.

Strengths

Administrative and technical support staff appear highly motivated
There is a strong identification with the department
There is a high level of satisfaction in terms of collegiality and working atmosphere
We thank the committee for these comments with which we agree. Our department makes continuing efforts to support all staff and maintain a collegial atmosphere among all its members.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

It appears accounting staff, technical staff and administrative staff carry workloads and solve tasks that might be above what is expected at their pay scale (it appears staff with similar tasks e.g. in central administration earn substantially more). However, there exists no possibility for promotion due to a capping of the pay scale for these positions. The current situation creates a very high and

acute risk of losing highly qualified and enthusiastic staff. It is strongly suggested that the university leadership reviews this situation and seeks options to swap these positions with potentially currently vacant positions to allow career progression.
We are in full agreement with these points raised by the committee, have repeatedly asked UCY administration for providing with such opportunities, and will continue pursuing these goals in all our capacity.

There is potential to support laboratory technical staff in expanding their skill sets through encouraging trainee programme attendance or embedding into other international teams for training in new skills and techniques, e.g. through ERASMUS plus or similar measures.
Our department encourages all staff to take advantage of all training opportunities and has never raised obstacles to technical or other staff in participating in such programmes.

General impression that laboratory technical staff positions in numbers overall substantially below international standard, limiting international competitiveness in teaching and research excellence.
We agree with the committee. We have repeatedly asked our administration for more staff. Of course, position availability depends on what is offered to UCY by the government, which is beyond our reach.

4. Learning and Teaching

Sub-areas

4.1 Planning the programmes of study
4.2 Organisation of teaching

Findings

The Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus promotes a learning environment that fosters the development of critical thinking among its students. The number of students in the classes is appropriate, allowing for active participation and better comprehension of the lessons, which enhances student-centered learning. This smaller class size facilitates more meaningful interactions between students and lecturers, contributing to a more effective and engaging educational experience.

We thank the committee for these positive comments. Indeed, we make continuous efforts to provide the best educational experience to our students despite the shortage of human resources.

The teaching staff are dedicated to periodically reviewing the programme of study, making adjustments based on BSc student needs and feedback. Students are actively involved in this process, with representatives participating in the departmental council, ensuring that their perspectives are considered in programme development and review.

Student participation in all processes aiming to improve our educational output is strongly encouraged and welcomed by the department. We thank the committee for underlining our continuous efforts to revise our programmes of study, in which we devote a significant amount of our effort, especially by the respective departmental Under- and Postgraduate Studies Committees.

The department sets high student admission criteria, consistently attracting high-caliber students, which helps maintain a rigorous academic environment at BSc level. Additionally, there is strong evidence that students can easily communicate with the teaching staff, promoting an open and supportive atmosphere.

Indeed, we try to find the optimal balance between student quality and numbers, within the limits set by relevant legislation and rules. All members of teaching staff are ready to discuss with students issues related to teaching and other aspects of their academic life, and each student, on day 1, is assigned an academic staff member that serves as an 'academic advisor' that provides guidance throughout the student's studies.

However, while the department integrates theory and practice to some extent, there are limitations due to a low number of laboratory exercises. This partial integration of hands-on experience with theoretical learning presents an area for potential improvement, particularly in enhancing the practical skills of students.

We have gradually increased the laboratory components of several courses throughout the years, in accordance with our human and other resources. It is true that there is room for further improvement, especially when we can use more teaching lab space in our new building. The improvement and inclusion of more laboratory components is an integral part of the programmes' revision scheduled in 2025 to be implemented in the new facilities. We have to also note that we have already added a new course (from Sept. 2025) on

quantitative data analysis with hands-on practical exercises in our undergraduate programme; the course will be offered by the Medical School and will be tailored to our students' needs.

Strengths

They promote the development of critical thinking
The number of students in the teaching rooms is ideal to promote the active participation of them and better understanding of the lesson and so promotes better student- centered learning
Teaching staff seem to periodically review the program of study and adapt it to their students' needs
Students are actively involved (via their colleagues that are members of the departmental council) in the review and development of the program.
Student admission criteria are very high and this attracts the highest level students to apply
Students can easily communicate with the teaching staff.
We thank the committee for pinpointing these strengths, which we highly value and aim to further enhance, as explained below.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The Department only partially integrates theory and practice due to lack of laboratory/fieldwork exercises
We have been gradually increasing laboratory and fieldwork components during the past years, within our capacity in terms of available staff and space. We need to note that today our undergraduate programme includes two pure laboratory compulsory courses in which students learn many important techniques. In addition, there is a separate lab+fieldwork component in two biodiversity-related compulsory courses, namely *Zoology* and *Ecology*, and a fieldwork component in the compulsory course *Botany*. Furthermore, the elective courses *Marine Biology*, *Fauna of Cyprus*, *Plant Physiology*, *Molecular Biology of Plants and Biotechnology*, *Animal Behaviour*, and *Ornithology* include lab and/or fieldwork components too. Additional courses, such as *Genetics, Microbiology* (compulsory) and *Microscopy Techniques* (elective), also offer a limited set of lab exercises, whereas the courses *Introduction to Computational Biology* (compulsory) and *Computational and Systems Biology* (elective), as well as the new course on Quantitative Data Analysis (to be offered from Sept. 2025 by the Medical School), are largely based on hands-on exercises. Most importantly, the two-semester *Diploma Thesis,* which is compulsory for our students and carries a significant ECTS load, is almost always based on lab/field work and offers students practical training and rich experience in several techniques and methods of data analysis. We do agree that there is still room for further improvement, which we have scheduled for the programme's revision in view of our moving to the new building where we can take advantage of better infrastructure for such exercises.

5. Teaching Staff

Findings

The teaching staff at the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus are highly motivated to deliver internationally competitive training programmes. There is clear evidence that the faculty regularly reflects on the current curriculum and seeks to improve course content, demonstrating a commitment to academic excellence. This self-awareness extends to recognizing potential shortcomings in comparison to international competitors, and there is a clear trajectory toward expanding the teaching portfolio through new hires to address any gaps.

We thank the committee for the kind words. We try to continuously evaluate our teaching performance and output and make necessary adjustments to extent possible withing our capacity.

Teaching duties are well-balanced among the academic staff, with substantial discussions taking place among lecturers to ensure that course content is aligned and coherent across the department. However, one notable challenge is the limited availability of support staff for teaching, particularly in areas that require hands-on training and laboratory/fieldwork-based courses. The lack of adequate support staff significantly hampers the department's ability to offer more practical, laboratory/fieldwork-oriented experiences for students. It is recommended that the university assess how additional resources can be allocated to support these areas, which are essential for comprehensive scientific training.

We agree with the committee that more teaching assistants are needed to expand our current lab and field work activities. We will continue to ask for more positions in future semesters.

To further enhance the practical component of the teaching programmes, the department may consider introducing more computer-based practical work beyond the already computation-heavy disciplines. This could include courses on digital image analysis or training using legacy data for digital data analysis, which would provide students with valuable skills relevant to modern biosciences.

This is one of the components to be added in our undergraduate programme when we will be able to use the infrastructure of the new building. Such components are already included in the proposed revisions of our postgraduate programmes.

Another important area for improvement is the use and allocation of teaching assistants (TAs). Currently, there is no clear vision or system for determining who receives a TA and when. Establishing a structured approach to the allocation of TAs would help provide stability and ensure the quality of teaching. It is crucial that the university guarantees a certain number of TA positions over multiple years, allowing for better long-term planning and ensuring consistency in the support provided for teaching.

It must be noted that the UCY, taking into consideration its budget, announces the number of TA positions per department twice a year (at the beginning of each semester); therefore, long-term planning for TA allocation by the department is not feasible.

Nevertheless, it is probably our fault that the committee is not aware that we do have a clear system in TA allocation, which has been decided by the Departmental Council several years ago. Of course, this system is adjusted to the limited number of TA positions available. According to this system, priority for TA allocation is given to compulsory courses taught by permanent academic staff (not by Special Teaching Scientists) and

contain lab/field work components. In case additional positions are available, TAs are allocated to compulsory courses with large audiences, and next to electives with lab/field work components. TA allocation is a privilege of the department's Chair. In case we are given more TA positions in the future, we shall expand this policy to more courses.

Strengths

Staff are generally highly motivated to deliver internationally competitive training programs
There is clear evidence they reflect on current offers and improve coursework
There is a general awareness of potential shortcomings in comparison to international competitors
There is a good trajectory of further expanding the teaching portfolio and filling gaps through new hires
Teaching duties are very well balanced between academic staff; contents seem to be discussed a lot between lecturers
We thank the committee for identifying these strengths which we do try to enhance further. Indeed, we discuss a lot on course contents, programme's structure, etc., and much time is invested in the continuous improvement of all such components via minor or wider adjustments/changes across the years. The small number of teaching and assisting (technical, TAs) staff though sets limits to our capacity in optimizing our output, especially when sabbaticals are taken into account too.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Support staff for teaching appears very limited to non-existent, depending on the area of training. This creates limits, specifically for hands-on training and laboratory-based courses. University should assess how additional resources can be provided.
We cannot agree more on this point and we shall ask for more supporting staff in any opportunity.

Teaching staff might assess possibilities to introduce computer-based practical work beyond the already computation-heavy disciplines, e.g. through introducing digital image analysis and training courses making use of legacy data for digital data analysis training.
As explained above, such components are scheduled for when we can use the infrastructure of the new building, hopefully starting in spring semester of 2026.

A clear vision on who gets a TA and when would be important. The positions should be attributed in advance to help provide stability and ensure quality of the teaching. Of course, the university must "guarantee" the number of positions for a certain number of years to allow for a multi-year planning.
Even though we have established a system for TA allocation (see above), it is true that we do need to know their numbers well in advance of each semester's beginning to make better programming. We'll do our best to make this possible, but the timing and approval procedures of UCY's annual budget sets additional obstacles.

6. Research

Findings

The Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus demonstrates strong research activity, with staff making effective use of available resources to support their research endeavors. Many of the department's professors are internationally recognized within their respective disciplines, contributing to the department's strong research reputation on a global scale. Research conducted within the department is well aligned with the training needs of junior researchers and PhD candidates, ensuring that students are actively involved in gaining valuable research experience. The department has also been successful in disseminating its research internationally, with several notable outreach activities linked to research that are well developed and contribute to the visibility of the department's work.

We thank the committee for these kind remarks that offer a welcome recognition of our department's achievements and our academic staff quality.

Despite these strengths, the department faces significant external challenges, particularly related to the limitations of national funding schemes. The two-year funding duration common to national grants compromises the ability to plan and sustain long-term research projects. Additionally, the intense competition for European Union (EU) funding further complicates the situation. It is recommended that the university leadership flag these issues at the governmental level to advocate for more sustainable funding opportunities.

We cannot agree more on these comments! We have and will continue to make strong efforts by sending official letters, making public announcements, etc., also at the School and UCY administration levels, to exercise pressure to the government for regular and increased funding opportunities, especially regarding basic research.

In terms of research output, the department's publication activity appears appropriate given the pool of principal investigators. However, there is some variability in grant funding across the department. To address this, internal review mechanisms between peers could be introduced to enhance the success rate of research proposals and improve the overall consistency of research output.

We thank the committee for the kind words and for this suggestion. We must note that variability in funding is also related to variability in subjects among colleagues, but sometimes also within activities of the same labs! As said, basic research lacks adequate and regular funding from national resources, whereas EU funding is mostly directed to applied research within a relatively narrow set of areas of interest, given that EU considers funding for basic research a national obligation mostly. As a result, several important fields have limited opportunities for funding whatsoever. Furthermore, the diversity of subjects among the small number of staff in our department does not allow for an extensive internal peer review mechanism. Nevertheless, most colleagues do apply such a mechanism informally when preparing research proposals.

Strengths

Staff make good use of their resources for research activities
Many professors are internationally recognized in their specific disciplines
Research carried out is well aligned with training needs of junior researcher and PhD candidates
There are good examples of research being well disseminated internationally
Outreach activities linked to research very well developed

We thank the committee for these comments and we reassure them that we'll continue along these lines in the future.

<u>Areas of improvement and recommendations</u>
National funding schemes are limited to two year funding durations, which significantly compromises continuity in research activities and solid longer term planning. At the same time there is excessive competition for EU funding programmes, making it hard to receive sufficient research funds from EU projects alone. We encourage the university leadership to flag this at the governmental level.
We concur with this recommendation and we will assist UCY administration towards achieving these goals.

Overall publication activity appears appropriate for the pool of principal investigators, but publication output is somewhat heterogeneous. Consider internal review mechanisms between peers to increase success of submitted proposals.
As said, this is mostly due to variability of research subjects among a small number of colleagues, which hinders also the setting up of such an internal peer review mechanism.

7. Resources

Findings

The Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cyprus appears to have adequate resources in terms of laboratory infrastructure, including instrumentation, as well as consumable materials needed for ongoing research and teaching activities. Additionally, a new building and expanded laboratory space are expected to become available soon, which is urgently needed to accommodate the department's growing needs.

Indeed, the new building will provide the necessary lab space and accommodate most of the department's other needs for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, we need to note that, even though the department has managed to secure necessary infrastructure for labs and teaching, it still faces a lot of problems in terms of space with much of its equipment installed in inappropriate sites (with all the risks in terms of proper functioning and security) and restricted teaching lab capacity. The long delays in the construction of the new building have caused several issues with infrastructure that reverberate in the department's overall performance.

However, a major shortcoming is the critical lack of technical support staff and teaching assistants. This shortage significantly limits the department's ability to offer laboratory-based modules and hands-on training, which are essential components of scientific education. It poses a substantial risk to the department's international competitiveness in both research and teaching across all disciplines. A very strong recommendation is made for university leadership to address this issue by expanding the resources dedicated to technical support and teaching assistants, as this is crucial for maintaining the department's high standards.

We thank the committee for this comment, with which we fully agree and make continuous efforts towards amending the problem.

Additionally, the department currently lacks essential facilities for experimental plant biology, such as greenhouses and growth chambers. These resources are vital for research and training in plant biology and must be addressed to fully support the department's diverse research areas.

Indeed, we currently lack such facilities. Nevertheless, the recruitment of new staff (one Assistant Professor already hired and one position still processed) in the general field of plant science, will contribute to amending this shortcoming. The recently hired colleague has already secured significant funding for installing relevant infrastructure, and the new building will provide opportunities to further expand it, especially when the selection process for the new open position is concluded.

Strengths

Resources for laboratory infrastructure such as instrumentation appear sufficient
consumable resources are also adequate
New building and additional laboratory space will soon be available and is urgently needed

We thank the committee for these comments with which we concur wholeheartedly. We hope that no more delays are to be expected with our new building.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The major shortcoming is a lack of technical support staff and teaching assistants, currently massively limiting the scope of laboratory based modules and hands-on work. We make a very strong recommendation to the university leadership to expand the resources. Otherwise there is a

very high risk of losing international competitiveness in research and training activities across all disciplines combined in the department.
As already said, we agree with this comment and urge UCY administration to take immediate action towards amending the problem.

Facilities for experimental plant biology are lacking, i.e., no greenhouses or growth chambers, and the department should consider how to provide these in the future, as it will not be possible to expand plant biology research without appropriate facilities
Such facilities are going to be established in the new building with the assistance of the new academic staff members that have been hired and going to be hired in the field of plant science. Significant funding for such infrastructure has been already secured by the newly hired member of our department's academic staff that works in this field.

B. Conclusions and final remarks

The department demonstrates a commendable commitment to academic excellence in both research and teaching. The department's teaching staff are highly motivated, and their efforts to regularly review and improve the curriculum reflect a strong focus on student-centered learning. Student involvement in programme development further enhances the educational experience, and the department continues to attract high-caliber students due to its stringent admission criteria. However, the integration of theory and practice remains limited, particularly due to few laboratory exercises, which highlights a key area for improvement.
We thank the committee for these very supporting comments. As far as the incorporation of lab exercises in our undergraduate programme is concerned, we have to note that our undergraduate programme will become revised in 2025, in view of our moving to the new building that will provide the necessary teaching lab space for such an expansion in the content of several courses. We need to note also that in the past few years we have increased lab and fieldwork components in several courses (see Part 4 for a detailed list), within the limited capacity available in terms of space and technical staff. Furthermore, we have already added a new course (from Sept. 2025) on quantitative data analysis with hands-on practical exercises in our undergraduate programme.

Research activities in the department are well aligned with student training and are internationally recognized. However, challenges with national and EU funding limit long-term research planning and continuity, posing a threat to sustained success. It is crucial for the university leadership to advocate for more sustainable funding mechanisms at the governmental level. Furthermore, while research output is appropriate, internal peer review processes could enhance publication consistency and success in grant applications.
The problem with funding is a major issue and, evidently, we do need to work with our administration to exert more pressure on governmental bodies. Our department is working also with other departments of the School of Pure and Applied Sciences towards this goal, sending letters to competent authorities, announcements to the press, etc.

A significant issue lies in the department's human resources, specifically the critical shortage of technical support staff and teaching assistants. This gap severely limits laboratory-based training and poses a risk to the department's international competitiveness in both teaching and research. Expanding these resources is essential to maintaining high standards. Additionally, facilities for experimental plant biology, such as greenhouses and growth chambers, are lacking and need to be developed to support the department's diverse research portfolio.
We cannot agree more with the committee on the shortage of technical support, and we urge UCY administration to take immediate actions to secure more such positions by the government and to allocate available positions to our department. Regarding plant biology infrastructure, we have already taken steps towards amending the problem (one member of academic staff hired in 2022 and one more to be hired in 2025 in this field, who will organize the establishment of such infrastructure), and will invest more resources on this when we move to the new building where more space will become available.

Overall, while the department shows significant strengths, addressing the highlighted resource limitations, improving practical training integration, and securing more stable funding will be crucial steps in ensuring the department's continued growth and excellence in research and education.

We thank the committee for this positive evaluation and we agree that we need more support in technical staff that will enable us to further support the practical training of our students and enhance our research potential.

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