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Response to External Evaluation Report for the Department of Social and Political Sciences

Dear Mr Aletraris,

Thank you for sending the external evaluation report for our Department. We are thankful for the thoughtful and helpful remarks of the External Evaluation Committee.

Five out of the six academic programs offered by the Department have already successfully completed the Cyprus Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (CYQAA) evaluation and we are thankful for your careful and diligent implementation of the evaluation procedure.

With regards to the departmental evaluation, we gladly note the Committee's view that "this is a generally conscientious and well-managed department," that "standards are high" and that the "the department has a strong research profile in terms of publications and coverage."

We are particularly pleased with Report's conclusion that "this is a strong department with committed and well-trained staff, who are motivated to deliver high quality teaching and publications in a collegial environment."

Herebelow please find our responses to the detailed comments included in the Report:

Comment:

1.1 Mission and strategic planning

This is a generally conscientious and well-managed department, which members communicate internally about mission and strategic planning. The programmes of study is aligned with European and international practice in most respects. However, the Committee felt that there are a number of areas which could or should be improved in order to improve strategic planning as a developmental tool for the department.

Notably: 1) Collecting and analyzing data: we believe that the University or Department must systematically track the destination of graduates and collect precise

information on employability. Additionally, while the Department obtains high student satisfaction scores, those must be analysed by individual programme.

Response:

In June 2019, and after similar comments from the CYQAA external evaluation committees that reviewed five of our academic programs, the Department ran two surveys among its graduating class and its graduates from previous years. In both these surveys, seniors and graduates gave very high scores to the Department, its programs and its teaching (e.g. over 75% of seniors have a “positive” or “very positive” opinion for each of the three).

Based on these surveys, the Department has started collecting employment data (e.g. about a third of graduates work in the public sector and a tenth in NGOs).

Starting this year, the Department has budgeted (8/2019; 13/11/2019) an annual event with graduates to discuss their experience and their employment trajectory. The first event is planned for late March 2020.

The University has also started enhancing its database of graduates and it is conducting a survey of graduates. The Department is awaiting the findings.

Comment:

2) Long term strategy and analysis of challenges and areas for improvement. Formally, the Department has developed short, medium, and long term strategies as well as a SWOT analysis. However, those should be further developed and remain too general. There needs to be clarity about the timeframe of periodic reviews. Furthermore, the Committee felt that the analysis of challenges and areas for improvement could be far more effective. At the moment, it focuses on the Department’s needs in terms of allocation and provision which are real. However, this does preclude a more reflective analysis focusing on what the Department itself could do better, and how it could demonstrate its capacity to offer further benefits to the University and society if it is allowed to expand.

Response:

We acknowledge that the departmental strategy (especially, for the medium- and long-term) is dynamic and needs refinement. The Departmental Council plans to update its strategy in the coming months, after the completion of new hires.

Implementation of short-term strategy (2019-2021)

That being said, the Department has already started implementing its short-term strategy (see Appendix I for comparison) and expects to complete all its short-term aims by the end of 2020 – about a year ahead of the original schedule.

First, the Department has already started filling resource gaps and decreasing its dependence on (otherwise, excellent) part-time teaching staff. We gladly note that the University has started acknowledging the resource deficiencies and potential of the

Department and welcome the Senate's decision (1/2020; 15 January 2020) to allocate six more positions in the coming period. The increase in the number of positions brings the Department closer to its long-term strategic objective of becoming, subject to relevant approvals, a fully-fledged Faculty of Social Sciences.

Second, the Department has significantly enhanced its online presence and it has undertaken important initiatives (e.g. the preparation of a departmental video) to promote its teaching, research and social activities.

Third, the Department began its internship program, which will allow students to gain practical experience in private and public organizations (starting in the summer of 2020).

Fourth, the Department has already conducted two graduate surveys and is building a database that will allow it to better connect with its 1300 graduates.

Finally, the Department now offers four courses in English, with very high registration rates both from Erasmus and local students. In the following years, and subject to resource availability, the goal is to increase the number of courses in English, as local students truly appreciate this international learning environment.

Medium-term strategy (2022-2024)

In terms of the medium-term strategy, the Department has already started implementing some of its key components:

First, the Department started discussing the further development and expansion of its graduate programs and expects to offer one or two new programs in 2021 (a year ahead of schedule).

Second, the Department has experienced a substantial increase of the admission grades for all three of its programs (the lowest entry scores went up by about one point out of 20 since 2018 and two points since 2017). On the basis of these results, the Department agreed to increase the student intake by about 10% starting in 2020.

Third, the Department has already made important changes to its three undergraduate programs to enhance methodological and writing skills and to respond to comments made during the CYQAA programmatic evaluations.

Fourth, the Department (meeting 1/2020; 19/2/2020) has approved incentives for submission of funding applications.

Finally, the Department is undertaking initiatives to explore potential demand for a distinct "Anthropology" direction in the existing Sociology program.

Overall, the Department has a clear set of strategic goals and objectives and it has made significant progress in their implementation. In recognition of these efforts and on account of significant resource shortages, the University has recently (January 2020) decided to allocate new faculty positions to the Department. This will facilitate

the development of graduate programs that will allow the Department to better meet academic goals and social needs.

Comment:

3) Finally, whilst the three undergraduate programmes have a clear place in the department's strategy, the Master level remains insufficiently developed and coherent. The strategic must further clarify what are the Department's goals and targets at that level.

Response:

See comments above.

Comment:

1.2 Connecting with society

In some respect, given the limited size of the Department, a lot of activities (conferences, events, etc) are highly beneficial to society. Moreover, the Department boasts contacts with significant stakeholders. However, given the unique place of Cyprus at the heart of a number of critical contemporary social and political challenges the Committee that felt that even more could be done to engage with the needs of demands of society in Cyprus and beyond (including but not limited to issues of defense, migration, multi-culturalism, employment, etc). With regards to relations to alumni, we note the existence of an association and a facebook page, however, tracking alumni immediately from the moment that they graduate would make those efforts more effective (jobs, communication).

Response:

Faculty members of the Department serve on a number of national committees (e.g. the Geostrategic Council, the Bicomunal Technical Committee on Education, the national Media Complaints Commission) and international bodies (e.g. the European Institute for Gender Equality); they prepare reports for international organizations and serve on various national and international committees. In this sense, the Department is making every possible effort to be meet the needs and demands of society in Cyprus and beyond. We acknowledge that there is room for expanding the range of issues and activities and anticipate that the addition of new hires will enable the Department to do even more.

Moreover, the Department is making systematic efforts to create a database of its graduates to track their development and to encourage their participation in the dozens of outreach events (talks, films, visits) organized by the Department every year.

Comment:

1.3 Development processes

Standards are high, however, recruitment of foreign students could be improved. The department generally functions well but has demonstrated a capacity for expansion.

Programmes attract 10-20% foreign students. That proportion could be increased notably from the regional market (Mediterranean, Middle East, etc) as long as more teaching is done in English.

Response:

To enhance the international profile of the student body, the Department offers four undergraduate courses in English and plans to increase this number in the coming years to attract more international students through the Erasmus program.

More importantly, the Department is considering the possibility of developing its first graduate program in English (e.g. on Peace and Conflict or Global Crises, for which it has an open faculty position). We anticipate that, given the location and the international profile of the Department's faculty, such a program would be internationally competitive.

Comment:

2.1 System and quality assurance strategy

There are systematic course evaluations though the Quality Assurance focuses predominantly on teaching, in which the department receives positive results. Some students regretted not to be more involved with the follow up of the course evaluation and discussion of how teaching could be further improved.

Response:

In line with its commitment to the CYQAA to hold an annual meeting for quality assurance purposes, the Department held a meeting of its faculty and student representatives (8/2019; 13/11/2019) and extensively discussed its teaching policies and outcomes.

Comment:

2.2 Quality assurance for the programmes of study

Whilst the department has a culture of quality assurance, a number of elements could be improved. The level of personal support to students is in the process of improvement but could be more transparent and systematic. Similarly, the students the Committee talked too were unsure about processes in case of significant problems. Ultimately, the onus is on the Department to ensure that all students are fully aware of complaint and resolution procedures should they experience significant difficulties during their time at the University. A systemic understanding of graduate destinations is missing.

Response:

In line with its commitment to the CYQAA and following up on its decision (3/2019; 20/3/2019), the Department has improved its student advising policies, designating a week each year for consultations between students and their advisors. Student representatives have also taken a more active role in bringing cases of students with significant problems to the attention of faculty (e.g. the faculty representative for disabilities).

Comment:

3. Administration

Generally, procedures are well-thought through and discussed broadly within the department. It is however important to ensure that staff and students alike are always fully aware of them.

Response:

The Department has prepared and published a Student Guide, updated every semester, to inform students (and faculty) of all important rules, procedures and processes.

Comment:

4.1 Planning the programmes of study

The programmes of study rely very heavily on a large proportion of compulsory courses, especially for political science and sociology. This limits students' choices and makes it harder for permanent staff to offer specialized research-lead courses and to regularly update the curriculum and course choices. A dissertation/final projects should be systematically offered to final year students across programmes.

Response:

The Department acknowledges the emphasis placed in compulsory courses being taught by permanent staff, at the expense of research-led teaching of elective courses. This is due to central University guidance as well as staff shortages. It plans to revisit this policy as it fills vacant faculty posts, in consultation with the University authorities.

The Department is making efforts to increase the number of students taking up the dissertation option. For example, following up on the suggestion of the External Evaluation Committee for the Political Science program, a new "Research and Writing" course has been introduced for all third-years, to prepare students for the dissertation. Similarly, the new second-year Sociology course "Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences" is designed for small audiences and involves writing a mini-thesis .

Comment:

4.2 Organisation of teaching

The department clearly cares about giving students a good teaching and learning experience, although this remains an area where one must constantly strive to engage students fully and to diversify approaches and experiences (problem solving, etc).

Response:

The Department is making constant efforts to improve its curriculum as demonstrated by the substantial changes to its three undergraduate programs in 2019 and in subsequent changes incorporating all CYQAA suggestions.

Comment:

5. Teaching staff

The Department believes that it would require larger numbers of permanent staff to deliver its full potential. The current staffing levels enable the department to deliver the current programme well, however, a higher proportion of permanent staff would make it possible for the Department to offer a larger number of electives in the core disciplines of the department (notably in 3rd and 4th years) which would benefit students choice and lead to a higher programme quality.

Response:

The Department agrees with this observation and notes that the University is increasingly recognizing the resource shortages of the Department, allocating new positions.

Comment:

6. Research

On the whole, the department has a strong research profile in terms of publications and coverage. However, more attention should be given to encouraging staff to apply for external funding, and benefit from adequate incentives when obtaining large grants. Moreover, research led teaching is critical in the form of specialized elective modules and dissertations/final projects.

Response:

The Department hosts one of the top-ranked programs in Cyprus and in Greece (Political Science: 200-300 Shanghai Rankings 2019) despite the relatively small number of its faculty and the lack of emphasis on securing big grants. It aims to further enhance its international standing by continuing to publish research in top journals and venues.

To encourage staff to apply for external funding, the Department decided (1/2020; 19/2/2020) to finance research assistance for grant writing.

Conclusion

In many ways, this is a strong department with committed and well-trained staff, who are motivated to deliver high quality teaching and publications in a collegial environment. The facilities, administrative support, and environment are first class. The department also seems receptive to suggestions about improving the teaching experience of students. Nevertheless, the Committee thought that the strategic plan could be focused more effectively and reflectively to define what the Department (or if it were to split, departments) want to be in the next 10 years. A number of key issues include enforcing the highest level of transparency of procedures for the students, tracking graduate destinations and employability, as well as reacting to fundamental societal challenges to be more pro-active in adapting the programme of studies. More specific areas of attention should include the regular updating of the programme, the provision of more electives in the core disciplines, and a final year dissertation/project for undergraduate students as well as the Department strategy when it comes to Masters programmes. The development of English language courses would open opportunities to recruit high quality students from the wider region (Mediterranean, Middle East, etc). The department also needs to carefully consider incentivizing colleagues to apply for large external grants and produce a narrative that will convince the university and national authorities that appropriate expansion would be beneficial to them.

Concluding response:

The Department welcome's the Report's conclusion that "this is a strong department with committed and well-trained staff, who are motivated to deliver high quality teaching and publications in a collegial environment." It also acknowledges that there is room for refining its strategy, enhancing its outreach activities and incentivizing grant seeking. The Department remains committed to improving its curriculum and, given the allocation of new positions, the development of graduate program(s) that will further enhance its international profile and academic standing.

The Department is grateful for the useful evaluation processes of the CYQAA, which, in the past year, helped it substantially change its programs, policies and procedures. It remains committed to sustaining and improving the high quality of its teaching and research.

Appendix 1: Department's strategic planning (approved on 20.3.2019)

The Department aims to evolve into a Faculty of Social Sciences with three departments in Political Science, Sociology and Journalism; offering new and enhanced graduate programs to an increasing number of students with a better academic and international profile; and making new research inroads by better tapping into new funding opportunities.

In line with these overall objectives, the Departmental Council (16 faculty members and 4 student representatives) has approved the following strategic objectives and plan:

Short-term strategy: 2019-2021

In the next one to two years, the department has six strategic goals:

1. It aims to fill the important resource gaps in its three distinct undergraduate programs and decrease its current dependence on part-time teaching staff.
2. It also aims to undertake promotional initiatives that will improve the quality of incoming students at all levels.
3. It plans to initiate its approved internship program, which will enhance the practical skills and experiences of its students and to improve employers' perceptions about the skillset of its graduates.
4. It has a strategic goal to further internationalize its programs by attracting more Erasmus students and by expanding the range of courses available in English for Erasmus and local students.
5. It aims to further promote its teaching, research and social outreach activities by enhancing its online presence.
6. It aims to better connect with its 1300 graduates by creating a "graduate student database."

Medium-term strategy: 2022-2024

In the next three to five years, the department has the following goals:

1. Develop and offer one or two new graduate programs that:
 - a. utilize the unique capacity of the Department to bring together expertise from its Political Science, Sociology and Journalism faculty;
 - b. build on its international profile and its experience with the summer school in Peace and Conflict Studies;
 - c. and reflect the expertise and research interests of existing but also new recruits and the recommendations of external evaluation processes.
2. Encourage the submission of grant proposals in high profile and highly competitive European or other research calls which will further enhance the

research profile of the Department and provide the necessary resources for internationalizing and expanding its pool of doctoral candidates.

3. Further improve its undergraduate programs to:
 - a. Provide more practical and methodological skills and experiences to its students and make them more competitive in the labor market.
 - b. Improve and, if possible, expand the student intake
 - c. Explore demand for a distinct “anthropology” direction in the existing Sociology program.

Long-term strategy: 2025-2029

Develop the Department into a Faculty of Social Sciences with three Departments in Political Science, Sociology and Journalism.