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Αγαπητή κ. Κουσελίνη,

Θέμα : Σχόλια επί της Έκθεσης Αξιολόγησης του Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος *School Psychology*

Σε συνέχεια της Έκθεσης Αξιολόγησης του Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος **School Psychology**, το Πανεπιστήμιο Κύπρου εκφράζει την ευαρέσκεια του στο Φορέα ΔΙΠΑΕ και ειδικότερα προς τα μέλη της Επιτροπής Εξωτερικής Αξιολόγησης (ΕΕΑ), για το άρτιο και αντικειμενικό έργο που έχουν εκπονήσει κατά τη διάρκεια της επίσκεψής τους.

Η διαδικασία αυτή μπορεί να χαρακτηριστεί ως άκρως παραγωγική και εποικοδομητική, αφού τόσο τα σχόλια όσο και οι εισηγήσεις της Επιτροπής συμβάλλουν στη βελτίωση της ποιότητας και της ανταγωνιστικότητας των προγραμμάτων.

Επισυνάπτονται τα σχόλια που αφορούν το πιο πάνω πρόγραμμα.

Με εκτίμηση,



Καθηγητής Τάσος Χριστοφίδης
Πρύτανης



ΚΟΙΝ :

Καθ. Ειρήνη – Άννα Διακίδου, Αντιπρύτανης Ακαδημαϊκών Υπ., Πρόεδρος Επ. Εσωτερικής Ποιότητας
Πρόεδρο Τμήματος Ψυχολογίας
Λέκτορα Άντρια Σιήμη, Τμήμα Ψυχολογίας

ΔΔ/ΧΕ

The Department of Psychology would like to thank the five-member committee for their valuable time in evaluating the MA in School Psychology program and their insightful comments. We are grateful to the committee for taking the time to review all submitted documents carefully and to hold interviews with members of the department, and we welcome their suggestions that aim to strengthen the quality of the program according to international standards.

We have taken into consideration all constructive feedback that the committee provided and we believe that by incorporating appropriate changes, the program has further improved and can hold its unique position among other international programs offering specialisation in School Psychology.

We provide below detailed responses to all areas evaluated:

1. EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING WORK – AVAILABLE RESOURCES

We thank the committee for highlighting the department's support to strengthen the staffing in the area of School Psychology, the appropriate organisation of the practicals and internship, and the excellent monitoring of student progress and welfare.

“We commend the plans for recruiting another member of faculty with this background, to complement the existing staff profile.”

We note that although opening new faculty positions depends on central regulations of the University of Cyprus and is subject to State funding, the Department of Psychology is dedicated to recruiting additional faculty in the area when opportunity occurs. The department's commitment in securing new faculty positions that can also contribute directly to the program is further evidenced by the two vacancies currently available, with one of them earmarked to teach courses in the School Psychology program for which there had been no full-time personnel specialised in the subject.

“Supervisors noted that provision of continued education by the university would be a desirable goal to ensure further development of this element of the program.”

The department will continue to provide continued education when specific needs arise and expressed formally, in line with other learning deliveries that it has provided to the supervisors so far and consistent with University regulations. The department has and will continue to request specific budget allocation for this purpose.

2. PROGRAM OF STUDY AND HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

We welcome the committee's appraisal that the School Psychology program impacts the psychological services of Cyprus meaningfully by educating School Psychologists whose training integrates scientific knowledge with practical skills. We are also very pleased that the committee considers the structure of the program to have a clear conceptual framework and the quality assurance processes to be well-developed, and that the committee acknowledges the efforts to maintain the international dimensions of the program.

“Initial inspection of course materials and documentation indicated that coverage of research methods and statistics is insufficient in comparison to international standards. This should include consideration of increased coverage, with key elements that are already embedded in other course modules made explicit.”

We have made two key amendments to the program to increase coverage of statistics and research methods. Specifically, we have made appropriate modifications to the existing course PSY 604 (Multivariate Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences) to ensure that the material taught corresponds to the expected graduate level while students from other psychology graduate programs who do not have the expected undergraduate level of knowledge (as judged by a formal exam that will take place) will be required to attend the undergraduate courses in statistics before taking the graduate class. We have also added to the curriculum the course PSY605 (Psychometrics), with an emphasis on tool development and relevant methodologies and statistics, as a compulsory course for the School Psychology students. Finally, all instructors have agreed to update their syllabus so that elements of statistics and/or research methods embedded in their course are now made explicit and strengthened. The program's ultimate purpose remains to train school psychologists who can be both good consumers of research findings but also carry out their research independently.

“The committee lacked information about the management of the program itself. It would have been helpful to see an organisational chart and related information, making explicit the lines of accountability, status and authority of the main staff running the program. The mandate of the three-member program committee remains largely unclear (waiting for instructions and resources versus responsibility for the distribution of instructions and resources). The committee thinks that it is crucial for the future development of the program that the program committee has an appropriate authority.”

We appreciate the comment of the committee; in retrospect, an organisational chart should have been included as well as additional information clarifying the roles of the various committees and individuals.

It should be noted that the department has a separate committee for each of its program along with a Graduate Studies committee that oversees all graduate affairs – as per the legislation of the University of Cyprus (<http://ucy.ac.cy/legislation/volumeb/5.1.4.htm>). The School Psychology program committee has responsibility for the distribution of instruction to the students and relevant instructors but it does not have resources on its own – resources are distributed centrally. Also for decisions regarding credit transfers etc. the committee makes recommendations to the Graduate Studies committee and ultimately to the Departmental Council. While the council distributes resources, the Graduate Studies committee is responsible for applying the general regulations of the university about graduate studies, and the School Psychology program committee handles the internal affairs pertaining to the program (with approval from the bodies above).

“The (former) students drew our attention to the fact that the program is largely focused on the public sector, where there is an indication of a changing trend, which may have an impact on employment possibilities in the near future. The program team should take into account the developing needs of the future labor market and wider society. Employment prospects for school psychologists in Cyprus are changing. Currently, the remit is constrained by legal specifications relating to professional activity, hampering the development of a broader role. This would provide access to high quality psychological services for the whole population (rather than just those in the public sector).”

We understand the need to widen the clinical experiences of the trainee school psychologists to keep up to date with changing needs in the role of school psychologists in Cyprus. This is of course a new endeavour with great demands such as finding appropriate organisations and centres that can train our students, negotiating placements and securing clinical supervisors for the students, etc. Given these high demands, this suggestion cannot be fulfilled within the short period of time between evaluation outcome and departmental response. Realities are also

constraining at the moment as previous attempts at this endeavour proved difficult to implement due to the shortage of trained School Psychologists available to provide supervision outside the Public Sector. However, this is a point the program and Department have considered throughout the life time of the program, and given the changing employment landscape we ensure that the department will actively consider various possibilities for providing further clinical experiences to our trainee school psychologists, including placements in private practice. As a short-term measure, all instructors have been made aware of the need to address case examples, professional issues and employment options in their classes that go beyond the traditional public sector role.

3. RESEARCH WORK AND SYNERGIES WITH TEACHING

We would like to express our gratitude to the committee for commenting on the fact that *“Teaching staff have impressive CVs; all hold a PhD and have very good research track records.”*

“However, the evaluation committee considered that opportunities for students to address key research questions in school psychology would be enhanced by increased opportunities for participation in research (including practice-based research).”

We understand the added value of including practice-based research. However, it is important to note that this raises ethical complications due to protection of personal data and reasons of referral of the clinical cases at the Educational Psychology Service, which does not routinely collect data for research purposes and does not have a tradition of practice-based research, program evaluation or implementation of clinical trials that would have given students this opportunity, constraining therefore the implementation of this suggestion. However, we underline again that there are several faculty members in the Department carrying out research, including applied research with typically- and atypically-developing populations (including the implementation and evaluation of various interventions and programs). Therefore, students have the opportunity to collaborate with faculty for their research requirements or participate in projects as research assistants. Finally, we note that, with the latest addition of faculty in School Psychology, students are offered additional opportunities for participation in school-psychology related research. Having the committee’s comments in mind, we plan to encourage School Psychology students to become more actively involved in relevant department projects. A couple of years after the financial crisis, economic confidence rebounds again, and this is also evident – most importantly – in research and development. The Department is already ranked among the top three departments in the University in securing funding for research, and, thus, the opportunities for the graduate students to get involved in research are maximized again.

“The committee is of the view that having a thesis as compulsory part of the master’s program (e.g. 30 ECTS) is indispensable to meet international standards. In order to adequately prepare students for that, a focus on research methods and statistics should be included from the foundational year onwards. Current students informed us that they all intend to undertake a master’s thesis, so there are indications of the high value and level of interest in this element of the program. We recommend that the program team reviews the scheduling and amount of teaching necessary to support students to undertake a master’s thesis, and include this as a core requirement.”

The Departmental Board has reviewed carefully and discussed extensively the possibility of having the thesis as compulsory in the master’s program, something that we, in principle, agree with. However, according to University regulations all master theses across departments of the

University of Cyprus are credited with 45 ECTS. In addition, all master programs at the University of Cyprus are accredited with 180 ECTS in total. Unfortunately, the Department of Psychology cannot disregard these regulations at the present time. Therefore, to include the master thesis as a core requirement of the 180 ECTS requires removing 5 courses from the existing program; this would jeopardise the comprehensiveness of the program and the core academic knowledge provided to its students, qualities that the evaluation committee has already praised in its evaluation report, i.e., “*A clear conceptual framework underpins the structure of the program. There is progressive development of knowledge and skills over the period of study*”. Finally, given that the Department of Psychology is relatively new in comparison to other European Psychology departments, the relatively smaller number of faculty is not sufficient to supervise all School Psychology students if the thesis was made compulsory, jeopardizing the quality of the produced work. We note that faculty members in the Department also supervise PhD and undergraduate theses, limiting thus the number of school psychology students that each faculty member can supervise every year. Also, non-clinical faculty members supervise students from other graduate programs, limiting the number of school psychology trainees they can accept. However, we stress that although it may not be feasible at this time to make the thesis compulsory, nevertheless, making the thesis compulsory is a suggestion that the Department will continue to consider in light of possible changes in University regulations (e.g., allowing fewer thesis ECTS), additional faculty staffing, or even teaching credit the faculty for theses supervision. In the meantime, to ensure compliance with the substance of the committee’s suggestion, see response to point 2 above, referring to the decision of the Department Council to strengthen the research content of the program in any way currently available.

4. ADMINISTRATION SERVICES, STUDENT WELFARE AND SUPPORT OF TEACHING WORK

We appreciate the committee’s positive comments on the fact that our “*Administrative support is valued and of high quality, the infrastructure is well-developed to support the academic mission and the plans for the future are promising. The financial planning demonstrates clear prioritisation based on a range of criteria*”.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Overall, we are grateful to the committee for emphasizing that “*The MA in School Psychology is staffed by enthusiastic, committed staff who have created and carried this ambitious program forward, despite challenges that have been encountered. The quality of professional training is shown by the status of its graduates and the developments in school psychology practice in Cyprus*”. We acknowledge that “*The next challenge is to plan for sustainability and ensure robust structures and staffing for the future*” and as commented above, the Department will maintain every effort to ensure the program’s sustainability and further staffing. We have taken into careful consideration the “*suggested (some) areas for improvement*”, and we believe that the changes made on the basis of the evaluation “*will enhance both the research base and school psychology practice*”.

Quality standards/indicators graded with less than 4:

1.1.7. Statutory mechanisms, for the support of students and the communication with the teaching personnel, are effective.

The Department has statutory mechanisms for the support of its students at various levels. At the university level, all students have access to the services of the Student Affairs Office of the University. This Office has, among its other roles, the responsibility to manage student academic issues, like dematriculation, withdrawals from classes recognition and transfer of credits, and student life issues, like medical and mental health issues, issues of students with disabilities, etc. Students can also receive Psychological Assessment and Therapy services from the Mental Health Center of the University of Cyprus or outside referrals, both for personal and learning issues. At the departmental level, any student issues are resolved in a) collaboration with the 3-member School Psychology committee, b) the Coordinator of the School Psychology program, and c) with the Head of the department. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on the role of the Academic Advisor, who is responsible to guide the students in their selection of courses and the organization of their study program. The Academic Advisor is responsible to oversee and support students, maintain communication with the remaining faculty and intervene when the student requires support. For the students in the Masters in School Psychology, the Academic Advisor is always the Chair of the 3-member School Psychology committee.

Traditionally and strategically, the Chair of the 3-member School Psychology Committee is the line of communication between students and faculty. With the appointment of the new School Psychology faculty, this policy is reinforced. New entrants are properly informed that their first contacts for problem resolution is the Chair of the Committee (for academic matters) and the Practicum co-ordinator (for issues related to practicum and professional development), and that this remains the case throughout their studies.

1.2.6. Teaching incorporates the use of modern educational technologies that are consistent with international standards, including a platform for the electronic support of learning.

The Department places importance in the use of modern educational technologies. We already use a variety of technologies, e.g., the online platform Blackboard for teaching material, the Turnitin software for plagiarism detection, educational videos, online remedial applications for training purposes etc. We continue to improve and update those technologies in collaboration with the relevant service authorities of the university. For example, a complete overhaul of audio-visual equipment in classes is currently under way at UCY.

1.3.1. The number of full-time academic personnel, occupied exclusively at the institution, and their fields of expertise, adequately support the program of study.

As explained above, unfortunately, opening new faculty positions is regulated by the University of Cyprus. However, the department will maintain its efforts for additional recruitment of faculty in School Psychology, as it recognizes that it needs to strengthen its applied programs further [recruitment was based on the principle of securing at least 1 member of faculty for each area of Psychology. Now that this aim has been accomplished, broadening of expertise in each area is the next Department goal]. We note again that all faculty members contributing to the teaching of the program teach courses in the field of their specialisation (PhD and/or relevant research) which are intrinsically linked to various developmental areas

related to cognition, intelligence, and achievement, as well as the diagnosis and treatment of relevant disorders.

1.3.9. The academic personnel's teaching load does not limit the conduct of research, writing, and contribution to the society.

Although teaching load is higher than most other European universities, the faculty members of our department have managed to maintain a high productivity standard, both in terms of scientific outcomes and outreach activities. With a number of new funded research programs that we have secured since the evaluation, we aspire to further improve our research and dissemination record. Also, the Department organizes at least one international conference per year and has also undertaken the important work to host the 2020 meeting of the International School Psychology Association, offering, thus, graduate students excellent opportunities for education, training, workshops, and networking. Finally, although teaching load cannot be negotiated as it is determined by law, there are opportunities for buying out teaching time as research funding becomes available.

1.3.10. Future redundancies / retirements, expected recruitment and promotions of academic personnel safeguard the unimpeded implementation of the program of study within a five-year span.

The department strives to build further capacity by hiring new personnel. Despite the scarce availability of faculty positions, we have managed to increase our permanent staff drastically in the last few years, recruiting faculty at positions that are relevant to the School Psychology program (e.g., two recent hires in School and Clinical Psychology). We continue to seek opportunities to further raise our capacity through hiring permanent faculty (e.g., two faculty positions for Neuropharmacology/Psychopharmacology and Cognitive Psychology/Neuroscience are currently advertised) and other associates (e.g., a number of Special Scientist positions are currently open). In spite of the freeze in new positions experienced during the years of the economic crisis, the University has over 80 new positions now coming, that will be distributed to different departments. Based on calculations, our Department will be entitled to several more positions before reaching its capacity.

2.1.7. The higher education qualification awarded to the students, corresponds to the purpose and objectives and the learning outcomes of the program.

We place great importance on meeting the purpose, objectives, and learning outcomes of the program. Therefore, we watch closely scientific developments in the field of School Psychology and we remain open to modifying aspects of the programs to meet any emerging needs.

2.2.1. The course curricula clearly define the expected learning outcomes, the content, the teaching and learning approaches and the method of assessing student performance.

We acknowledge that the course curricula did not include the weekly schedule that the external committee would have liked to see. All faculty agreed to update their course curricula to clearly indicate course content.

2.2.4. The higher education qualification awarded, the learning outcomes and the content of the program are consistent.

The learning outcomes, the overall curriculum design, the courses content, the delivery, and the assessment of an analysis of the integrated knowledge, skills, and values needed by both students and society are priorities for the School Psychology Committee and the Department alike. Thus, we closely monitor coursework and other activities entailed by the program to ensure that the qualification awarded is consistent with the content and the learning outcomes. Student course evaluations are scrutinized to detect inconsistencies and take corrective measures as needed. To this purpose, modifications to the content of certain courses of the School Psychology program have been decided by the most recently departmental faculty meeting.

2.2.6. The content of courses and modules, and the corresponding educational activities are suitable for achieving the desired learning outcomes with regards to the knowledge, skills, and abilities which should be acquired by students.

We aimed to continuously improve our courses to match the needs of the field. As noted on 2.2.5, content from some courses is currently modified to improve learning outcomes. In doing so, we take seriously the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions should the students graduating from our program demonstrate.

2.2.7. The number and the content of the program's courses are sufficient for the achievement of learning outcomes.

Although we consider the number and content of the program's course sufficient for achieving the learning outcomes, we will continue to examine ways to improve the program by modifying existing courses or including new ones. We also note the changes referred to under point 2.

2.5.3. Students participate in exchange programs.

The department maintains a great number of Erasmus agreements for exchange visits with other European universities. We realize that students of the particular program, because of its relatively fixed structure, sometimes hesitate to participate in such exchanges. We are aware of this issue and we search for ways to encourage our students to better take advantage of this opportunity. However, given the applied nature of the program, it is also important to bear in mind that language might be an issue for supervised training in other cultural contexts, given that most European countries require that interns are native or fluent speakers of the language of the host country.

3.1.1. It is ensured that teaching and learning have been adequately enlightened by research.

That faculty in the department teach courses that are relevant to their specialization and own research ensures that course content incorporates the state-of-the-art in research and that students get to learn from active scientists.

3.1.2. New research results are embodied in the content of the program of study.

Please cf. our answer to 3.1.1.

3.1.8. The participation of students, academic, teaching and administrative personnel of the program in research activities and projects is satisfactory.

All students in the School Psychology program participate in research either through the compulsory research project or through the master thesis. Opportunities are also given to teaching and administrative personnel to enrich their background by sponsoring visits to other institutions and the participation to workshops and conferences related to School Psychology. Due to the high number of projects secured by the Department, opportunities for research involvement are ample and are only limited by the degree of interest by students themselves (please cf. our answer also to 1.3.9).

3.1.9. Student training in the research process is sufficient.

As detailed above, modifications to the program have been made to strengthen training in statistics and the research process. At the same time, the department and the School Psychology committee continuously explore new training opportunities for students (e.g., by establishing new exchange programs with institutions abroad). We stress that the committee's concern regarding this point has been noted by the department that is determined to monitor more closely the research training of students and identify any obstacles in this direction. Effectiveness of research training has already become the point of discussion at several Department Meetings.

4.2.7. The teaching personnel are provided with training opportunities in teaching method, in adult education, and in new technologies on the basis of a structured learning framework.

The department works closely with various service offices from the university (e.g., the Center for Teaching & Learning) to provide training opportunities to faculty and graduate students. A number of workshops on teaching methods and the use of new technologies are organized during the year at the university; the department encourages personnel and students to attend. As of this year the University has made it mandatory for new lecturers and instructors to attend short courses in teaching at the Center upon their hire.

4.3.1. The management and allocation of the financial resources of the program of study, allow for the development of the program and of the academic / teaching personnel.

We have implemented internal policies to fund academic and administrative personnel for participating at international conferences and for organizing local and international workshops. We believe that the knowledge gathered by participating in such events has a positive impact to the development of the program. We also allocate funds towards the development of faculty lab infrastructure and support for Research Assistants to support faculty towards the development of their research programs.

4.3.3. The remuneration of academic and other personnel is analogous to the remuneration of academic and other personnel of the respective institutions in Cyprus.

Remuneration for public institutions is regulated by the government and is generally higher than in private institutions. Unfortunately, there is nothing that the Department of Psychology

can do in terms of changing the level of remuneration, other than support its members to seek European grants.

4.3.4. Student tuition and fees are consistent to the tuition and fees of other respective institutions.

Tuition and fees are considerably lower at the University of Cyprus compared to private institutions in Cyprus that offer similar programs. Coupled with the high quality of teaching and research in the department, this provide an important competitive advantage to our program.