

Doc. 300.1.2

Date: January 9, 2020

Higher Education Institution's response

- **Higher education institution:**
University of Cyprus
- **Town:**
Nicosia
- **Programme of study (Name, ECTS, duration, cycle)**
In Greek:
Μεταπτυχιακός Τίτλος στη Βιοποικιλότητα και Οικολογία (3 εξάμηνα, 90 ECTS)
In English:
M.Sc. in Biodiversity and Ecology
(3 semesters, 90 ECTS)
- **Language of instruction:**
English
- **Programme's status**
New programme: No
Currently operating: Yes

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 and 2016” [N. 136 (I)/2015 and N. 47(I)/2016].

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.300.1.1) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study 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. 300.1.1).*
- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development

(ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.8, 1.9)

We thank the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) for their work and thorough effort. We agree with the EEC that our master programme complies with European standards and that the excellent research orientation of the program is one of its hallmarks.

Also, the low student to teacher ratio offers an exceptional opportunity for our students to train and work closely with their teaching instructors. As noted by the EEC, our faculty are actively working on research, which they embed in their teaching so as to provide both a theoretical and hands-on training to our students.

As the EEC points out, it is crucial for our programme of study to enrich the teaching expertise of our Department through the employment of new faculty members with scientific proficiency on specific areas of biodiversity and ecology, such as botany. However, new faculty positions are assigned to the University by the Government and then to Departments by the University's administration. Therefore, our Department cannot amend this issue by itself, while, at the same time, the severe space constraints it faces (as pin-pointed in several sections below), pose additional obstacles in employment of additional faculty. The relatively low number of specialized Ecology/Biodiversity courses offered, is directly related to this problem but we have taken measures to amend it, such as hiring a 'Special Teaching Personnel' staff member last year and 'Special Scientists' every semester to teach specific additional courses.

We do agree with the EEC on the issue of courses' logical sequence, but as acknowledged by the EEC, this is due to the necessity of accepting incoming students twice a year in order to address the low total number of students. If we only enrolled incoming students at the beginning of our academic year (which starts on the 1st of September), we would miss potential candidates from Greek universities that typically graduate by the end of September. We shall revisit our enrolment policy when we secure a good number of international students, following the increased visibility and advertisement of our program.

Finally, regarding the general textbooks suggested by the EEC, we have to note that, according to the policy of the University of Cyprus, students are not offered free textbook copies but they can find relevant textbooks for each course at the University library or online. We do make suggestions for such textbooks in the syllabi of all courses. For example, the syllabus of the course 'Advanced Issues in Ecology' (BIO 861) includes the following general textbooks under 'Suggested Reading': Begon M. et al. 2005. Ecology: From Individuals to Ecosystems, 4th Edition. Wiley; Pianka E. 1999. Evolutionary Ecology. Benjamin Cummings; Sutherland W.J. 2006. Ecological Census Techniques. Cambridge University Press; Weiher E. & Keddy P. 1999. Ecological Assembly Rules: Perspectives, Advances, Retreats. Cambridge University Press, while the syllabus of the course 'Molecular Ecology' (BIO 871) includes the following textbook as recommended reading: - Introduction to Molecular Ecology by Rowe, Sweet and Beebee (2017). 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press. We apologise if we did not present such information clearly to the EEC.

2. Teaching, learning and student assessment (ESG 1.3)

We thank the EEC for its comments and agree that the small student to faculty ratio provides a very beneficial training environment for our students. Although the small number of students can impair anonymous questionnaire feedback, as the EEC mentions, the personal relations between students and teachers are strong and as such, provide an open pathway of communication and evaluation and feedback during the courses.

Also, the strong synergy between theoretical coursework and research through academic courses, coupled with the small student to faculty ratio, provides a prolific environment for our students in developing research skills through their coursework.

Regarding formative assessments, we agree with the EEC that this will become an important issue when the total number of students is increased. We have already included formative assessments in courses with a high attendance rate, and we shall include such assessments in all courses in response to the success of our policy to attract more students.

One main goal of the Department is to increase the number of incoming students in the program of study. As the EEC points out, there are two main hurdles in achieving this goal. The first hurdle is the limited teaching and laboratory space, which severely impacts the day-to-day activities and future planning and growth of our Department. The second hurdle is the availability of resources for a proper and effective advertisement at both the national and the international levels. We have already requested such funding, as well as administrative assistance from the central authorities of the University of Cyprus, which have given a very positive first response.

3. Teaching Staff (ESG 1.5)

In addition to your response to EEA's comments on the teaching staff:

- a. fill in TABLE 1: TEACHING STAFF at the end of this form and
- b. send the curriculum vitae of all the program lecturers on the forms posted on the Agency's website as an annex. (Form 500.1.03 for Universities and Form 500.1.04 for Higher Education Institutes)

We thank the EEC for the positive overall assessment of the program of study. As the EEC has pointed out, though, our MSc in Biodiversity and Ecology program is principally organized around the expertise of existing faculty. Nevertheless, we have already hired a 'Special Teaching Personnel' staff member who is an expert in Marine Ecology, and we have secured the continuous collaboration with experts in other fields, such as Botany and GIS applications in Ecology, in the form of 'Special Scientists', to assist in teaching and supervision of students' theses. Furthermore, we expect that with future hirings, our Department will secure faculty with an expertise in such fields. However, it is unlikely that the Department will reach its full Teaching and Research Faculty capacity or even increase significantly in size in the following years, due to the severe limitations in available space. While the University is committed to constructing a new building to house our Department, it will take more than four years before this will be completed.

In addition, our Department tries to exploit all available opportunities to attract visiting experts from abroad, in the frameworks of our weekly seminars to post-graduate students (of compulsory attendance) but also via the Erasmus+ program and any other available means. Also, our Department constantly demands dedicated funding to assist such activities but the respective decisions are made by the central authorities of our University and, ultimately, depend on governmental funding.

4. Students (ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)

We thank the EEC for its efforts to obtain a thorough view of our Department through the scope of our faculty as well as the scope of our students. We are particularly pleased to see that the positive feedback our faculty receive from our students align with the assessment of the EEC.

With regards to the low number of students, we agree that it is an important area of improvement for which our Department has already requested from central university authorities to allocate funds and professional assistance with the promotion of our programs of study. Given the already positive trend that we see in incoming students, we believe that with the help of an effective promotion strategy, our Department will succeed in increasing the number of incoming students soon.

Regarding the information available to incoming students, we have already identified the problematic issues and have taken action to amend the problems with language. All information by our Department is now available to students in English

5. Resources (ESG 1.6)

We agree with the EEC that the severe space constraints pose a burden to the daily functions of the Department, as well as to immediate and future plans for growth and development. In addition to our continuous pressure to speed-up the construction procedures of our new building, we also make strong efforts to secure additional space for the years until its completion. Of course, this is an issue beyond the Department's control.

The EEC also notes that the rigid schedule of the study program is incompatible with the requirements for additional and more extensive field courses. Even though the University of Cyprus' rules for post-graduate studies pose some constraints, we constantly strive to secure additional time for field courses, and we have requested additional funds to support such activities.

As mentioned previously, our Department has already undertaken initiatives to better advertise our programs of study and has already requested from the central University authorities to provide the means to succeed in this.

6. Additional for distance learning programmes (ALL ESG)

Not applicable.

7. Additional for doctoral programmes (ALL ESG)

Not applicable.

8. Additional for joint programmes (ALL ESG)

Not applicable.

B. Conclusions and final remarks

Since its establishment in 2002, the growth and development of the Department of Biological Sciences have been remarkable. The Department now boasts a broad range of research areas, the highest concentration of state-of-the-art research infrastructure and the largest selection of academic programs in the biological sciences in Cyprus. Qualitative indicators such as competitive external research funding, high-impact publications, and international collaborations, attest to the continuous and diligent efforts of the Department to produce and disseminate knowledge, based on good international practices of research and scholarship. Our programs of study, including the Master's program in Biodiversity and Ecology are designed to provide students with high quality academic and research skills.

This exponential academic growth of the Department, however, is not matched by its expansion in building infrastructure. Teaching, office and laboratory space is sparse and prohibits the employment of additional Teaching and Research Faculty, which would add to the disciplines of expertise of current faculty and limit or eliminate the need of temporary teaching staff. The considerable delays in the construction of the new building impose hurdles in the growth and development of the Department and, correspondingly, affect further development of our programs of study. The current unofficial estimate for the completion of the new building stands at more than 3 years without that deadline being solidified, since construction has not yet started.

Our Department will continue its efforts to appeal to the central University authorities for additional space and new positions for academic faculty and administrative personnel. Taking into consideration the advice of the EEC, our Department will also request appropriate support in promoting and advertising the Biodiversity and Ecology programs of study.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Assoc. Prof. Pantelis Georgiades	Department <i>Chairperson</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Prof. Niovi Santama	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Coordinator</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Assist. Prof. Anna Papadopoulou	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Member</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Assist. Prof. Chrysoula Pitsouli	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Member</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Prof. Spyros Sfenthourakis	<i>Member of the Internal Evaluation Committee for the Programs of Study in Biodiversity and Ecology</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Dr. Dora C. Stylianou	Internal Evaluation Committees for Programs of Study and for the Department <i>Member</i> <i>University Officer</i>	

Date:January 9, 2020...