

# Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: 20/01/2021

- **Higher Education Institution:**  
University of Cyprus

- **Town:** Nicosia

- **Programme of study  
Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)**

**In Greek:**

Διδακτορικό στην Πληροφορική

**In English:**

Ph.D. in Computer Science (240 ECTS)

- **Language(s) of instruction:** Greek
- **Programme'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 2019” [N. 136 (I)/2015 to N. 35(I)/2019].**

## **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)*

The EEC states that “Based on the three accreditation reports and the remote site visit the EEC can conclude that the Department and the three programs being evaluated have high standards and meet the quality expectations.”. For the Ph.D. in Computer Science the EEC further states that “Students are offered a study programme that is at international standards both for topics, quality of teaching, resources and infrastructures.”. The EEC’s recommendation is: “Given the current trend towards internationalization in education and research it is highly recommended to increase international faculty recruitment and through this support education by expanding the course portfolio given in English. This development is expected to result in higher numbers of international students for M.Sc. and Ph.D. levels.”

### **The Department's response:**

**Upcoming developments are expected to enhance international faculty recruitment and English language course offering. A new MSc in Data Science will be initiated in September 2021. Moreover, a new MSc in AI for Careers in EU (that gained a 665,000 EUR funding under Connecting Europe Facility in the field of Telecommunications Digital Skills) is expected to commence in September 2022.**

**The new MSc in Data Science will be taught in English, while the planned MSc in AI for Careers in EU will include multilingualism (the various modules will be developed in all the languages of the consortium). Moreover, every new academic position of the Department is announced internationally, and this practice will continue. The efforts to recruit more international faculty as academic members of the Department will be enhanced and facilitated by the increased English language course offering, primarily in the context of the new Master programmes.**

**Also the International Masters in Cognitive systems, with its increasing number of students, offers a pool of potential PhD students.**

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

The EEC recommends that a “Stronger student mobility program could offer students a broader range of opportunities.”

### **The Department’s response:**

The Department supports the mobility of PhD students in several ways. Firstly, the Department is fortunate enough to participate in two Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) projects that provide grants to PhD students and support transnational, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobility. Specifically, the MSCA PhD students take part in short-term secondments to other research-focused organizations (universities, research centers, and companies) gaining experience and developing their employability skills.

Moreover, the PhD students that are affiliated with the CYENS (formerly RISE) Research Center benefit from its collaboration with the Max-Planck-Institut and University College London, two leading European Institutions. Students that receive a fellowship from CYENS, will have to collaborate with an international high profile researcher/professor and they will spend 20-30% of their time at the collaborator. Additionally, the Department is a member of the ERCIM Consortium (European Research Consortium for Informatics and Mathematics), and has access to its fellowship program. Furthermore, the collaboration network that will be set up in the context of the new MSc in AI for Careers in EU, will further enrich structured student mobility and the involvement of international faculty. It is also noted that faculty members, researchers and PhD students of the Department participate in COST actions and they make use of the Short Term Scientific Missions (STSMs) that facilitates visits to other institutions. The involvement in STSMs of COST actions will be strengthened.

Finally, the substantial involvement of the Department in international research collaborations and its participation in numerous European R&D projects, opens up further possibilities for PhD student mobility, given that a number of PhD students are employed on the said projects.

### **3. Teaching Staff**

*(ESG 1.5)*

The EEC comments that “The visit demonstrated that there is a good, clear and fair recruiting process in place and that the staff members are excellent researchers and well-prepared lecturers” and states that “the present situation is fragile and expansion in the staff number must be considered. There is a good proportion between junior staff and senior staff at professional positions.”. They also state “The number of teaching staff should be increased to better cover some areas and to avoid the looming risk associated with the retirement of some of the senior members of staff.”, and that “Teaching and research are well integrated however in most of the cases the topic is covered by only one researcher. This is not ideal from the research point of view because the researcher is operating in isolation, but it is also not ideal from a teaching perspective, because the absence of the researcher (for any reason) will cease the delivery of the topic making the programme vulnerable.”

#### **The Department’s response:**

**A critical short-term objective is the filling of the two new academic positions that have been allocated to the Department and are expected to be released and announced in 2021. Both positions are at the rank of Lecturer/Assistant Professor and can bring important new blood to the Department raising its academic capacity from the current 21 members to 23 members. The specializations for the two new positions have not been decided yet.**

**Furthermore, according to the new FTE algorithm of the University, the operational adequacy of the Department of Computer Science (given its current teaching obligations) corresponds to 27 full-time academic positions. Thus the Department is 4 academic positions short for attaining its operational adequacy, and as such it expects and hopes that these additional positions will be made available to it in the very near future. Such future positions, will be promptly and fully utilized with a view to creating overlaps with existing competences in such a way as to avoid fragilities in the future.**

#### **4. Students**

*(ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)*

The EEC comments that “The completion rate for PhD students is a cause for concern and needs to be investigated further for causes and the issues addressed.”, and that “The current scholarship stipend seems inadequate for Nicosia and needs to be revised in line with the cost of living index.”

#### **The Department’s response:**

The PhD completion rate is answered in section 7.

As of this academic year, the 8.000 Euro p.a. stipend is awarded to PhD students for 4 years, including a tuition fee waiver. This is a substantial improvement over the previous years, where scholarships were annual. Although it may not be on par with the cost of living in Nicosia, it is a decision taken by the University. Nevertheless, the Department is under the impression that this relatively new scheme attracts good candidates. However, it will remain vigilant, and, in line with the recommendation of the EEC, will closely monitor the completion rate of PhD students that are supported under this scheme.

The level of scholarship stipend is decided by the Graduate School and depends greatly on the budget of the University. Our representative to the Council of the Graduate School will raise the matter of increasing the scholarship amount. The Department will also propose that the Office of the Rector, currently responsible for Fundraising, establishes an Endowment, specifically for this purpose.

## 5. Resources

(ESG 1.6)

The EEC recommends the following:

The Department should track more closely the doctoral students who have not submitted after three years to improve the completion rates and ensure that they do not slip through the system.

The Department should support at a departmental level placement of their PhD students in internships in research projects or in industry in areas which complements their research.”

The EEC concludes that student support is partially compliant for PhD students and this is the only criterion in the whole evaluation (departmental, three postgraduate programmes) that is considered partially compliant.

### The Department's response:

Although the drop-out rate of doctoral students is not high, as explained in section 7, a number of developments and deliberate decisions have contributed to further improving the completion rate. Firstly, PhD students are only admitted provided a faculty member has consented to act as their research advisor, ensuring in this way a fit between candidates' research interests and faculty expertise. Secondly, a sizeable number of PhD students receive generous funding by Research Projects, that seems to contribute significantly to their success in completing their studies.

On the other hand, students that participate in EU funded R&D projects are offered possibilities for mobility and training in the partners' sites. Moreover, the two Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) projects, support secondments to other research-oriented organizations, and the ERCIM membership access to the Consortium's fellowships. Furthermore, students that carry out their research in CYENS, participate in cutting-edge research projects. Although it is possible for student placements and internships to be further supported by the Department, Cyprus is a country that has a rather limited research ecosystem, and low R&D expenditure, both in the public and private sector. Our Department aspires to be one of the driving forces behind R&D in the country, but it may take some time before we establish permanent links with the local industry, such that our students will benefit.

**6. Additional for distance learning programmes**  
*(ALL ESG)*

## **7. Additional for doctoral programmes**

*(ALL ESG)*

The EEC states that “There is a large number of students that register to the Ph.D. and then do not continue the studies. We have been told that these are not real discontinuations rather students that apply in several programmes and then choose one based on their preferences. This may be unavoidable but there could be an opportunity to try to retain some of these students perhaps engaging with them early on when the decision on where to go is not definite yet.”

### **The Department’s response:**

With respect to the number of PhD students, since 1997, 164 were admitted. Of those, 67 Graduated and 39 are Active now. Of the remaining 58, 48 were automatically removed from the programme because they were admitted but did not properly commence the programme and the remaining 10 voluntarily decided to terminate their PhD studies (at various stages). This means that the actual dropout rate is 10/164, i.e. about 6%.

The Department has seen a considerable increase in student numbers and funded projects in the decade 2005-2015. Since then it has maintained its progress, but with more sustained numbers. The specific growth in research opportunities, along with the overall economic growth of Cyprus has created a great demand at the Department for researchers. In most cases those researchers ended up also applying and being accepted to our PhD programme. However, funding was not always guaranteed and people often realized that being involved in research projects and pursuing a PhD at the same time was a difficult joint undertaking as the two were quite different things. This is a major factor for the large number of incoming PhDs in the last decade and the associated number of dropouts. In short, the Department was liberal in accepting PhD students.

Since 2013 and especially in the last 5 years, all research groups have become more conservative in their recruitment of PhD students. In addition, the economic crisis has forced a large number of students towards paid industrial jobs. The numbers of the last 5 years show a great normalization and the dropout rates now are minimal.

## **8. Additional for joint programmes** *(ALL ESG)*

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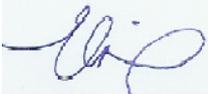
## **B. Conclusions and final remarks**

**The Department of Computer Science and the Postgraduate Programs Committee expresses its sincere thanks to the EEC for the in depth evaluation of its postgraduate programmes, and the interesting discussions and insightful exchanges that took place during the two-day online meetings with staff and students.**

**The Department fully agrees with the recommendations of the EEC and has already started implementing those recommendations that are within its sphere of responsibilities.**

**The Department also expresses its sincere thanks to the CYQAA and the officer supporting the whole evaluation process for their professionalism and for ensuring the smooth running of the evaluation process from start to finish.**

### C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Signature</b>
<b>Elpida Keravnou-Papailiou</b>	Chair of Department of Computer Science	
<b>Vassos Vassiliou</b>	Coordinator of Graduate Studies Committee	
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