

Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 27.4.2020

Higher Education Institution's response

- **Higher education institution:**

UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS

- **Town:** NICOSIA

- **Programme of study (Name, ECTS, duration, cycle)**

In Greek: ΔΙΔΑΚΤΟΡΙΚΟ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΙΔΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΝΙΑΙΑ
ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ

In English: PhD SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION

- **Language of instruction:**

- GREEK

- **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)

EEC's comments

Findings

The quality assurance of the PhD programme is publicly available. There are codes of ethics, rules and regulations and anti-plagiarism system.

Strengths

There are good links with stakeholders, there is an active student inclusion group and artists are brought in. Academic team are to be commended on successfully developing a PhD programme as a progression of a longer standing and successful MA programme.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The course references are extensive in English and Greek, suggesting that the focus is both local and international. However, the references do not include enough critical discourse about inclusion and an up-to-date review of the international literature. The students could engage in critical discourse between the inclusion ideals and the realities in Cypriot schools. We were unsure of the extent of the use of peer collaborative review in the periodic review of the programme. We were also unsure of the regularity of the course review and revision.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) for recognising that our PhD programme is of high quality and makes sure that all involved in it interact and learn from each other in the best possible way.

The EEC raised some areas of improvement and recommendations, which we appreciate. Here are our replies below.

We are happy to see that the EEC acknowledged the extensive references in Greek and in English used in our programme. In relation to the remark that there is a need about critical discourse and up to date literature, we would like to point out that in all our courses, the students are encouraged to read up to date literature and participate in critical discourse about inclusive education at international and local level, and draw the links with what happens in schools. Whenever there is a need, we use references that were published in the past, because we consider them 'classic' references or they are references from key authors in the field that we would like our students to engage with.

In relation to the comment about the regularity of peer collaborative review, we would like to note that following the new procedures of the Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, the course review will be conducted every three years.

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

EEC's comments

Findings

This is a very individualised programme with only 11 students in the entire PhD programme. The process of teaching and learning is flexible with students able to change modules according to their preferences and backgrounds. Students take an active role in the learning process, for example, students organised workshops and seminars. There is evidence of students undertaking independent work in the courses.

Strengths

There is a strong pioneering spirit that inspires students. There is mutual respect in the teacher-student relationship with students identifying strongly with academic staff. There are strong relationships between the academic staff team which can carry to programme into the future. Assessment allows students to show that they have achieved the intended learning outcomes. Students are given feedback, but we are uncertain about the nature of formative assessment.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

More use of ICT could be considered, for example, discussion fora, wikis, development joint writing and presentations, though we recognise that online learning is reserved for the Open University. The criteria for methods of assessment are not published enough in advance, although it might be that these are communicated verbally to the students rather than in a written format. We have little evidence about the rules of marking as well as the reliability or moderation of marking (e.g. procedures for double-checking grades, calibration of scores between academics).

HEI's response

We would like to thank the EEC for acknowledging that our PhD programme is individualised, flexible, respects students' various backgrounds, and promotes meaningful and constructive student-teacher relationships.

In relation to the areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC, we would like to clarify the following:

We are aware that online tools would make our courses more interactive and maximise the use of ICT for the benefit of the students. We make good use of blackboard in which we post our presentations, readings, instructions for assignments, criteria for evaluation of assignments and so on. Recently, the University updated its software and we have the opportunity to use Teams. This gave us the opportunity to create e-classes and register our students as members. Through Teams, we can chat, exchange materials and useful links, and arrange video conferences when needed. We intend to continue to use the opportunities of Teams in the future to increase interaction with our students.

The EEC commented on the clarity of the criteria of evaluation. Although each instructor follows their own way of communicating the criteria of evaluation, we consider that these criteria are made known to the students in the end. In particular, some of the instructors provide written information to the students, explaining each criterion and providing a clear list of issues that will be marked in an assignment, a presentation, a portfolio assignment, etc. Other instructors provide verbal information. In light of the EEC's remarks, we will improve the way we communicate the criteria for assessment, and make sure they are available in advance in written form.

Linked to the above, the process of marking differs among instructors. In particular, there are instructors who provide a list of written criteria for assessment, and use a detailed feedback form during marking so that the student is informed about his/her performance in each part of the assignment/presentation/activity. Others provide feedback by providing a list of comments that are relevant to what is marked. All instructors are committed in evaluating their students fairly and at the same time, provide feedback that will improve their performance. We understand the EEC's suggestion for double checking grades and calibrating scores between academics, but this process is not followed within the Department. However, we will discuss this suggestion with the Department and explore the possibility of developing such processes.

3. Teaching Staff (ESG 1.5)

EEC's comments

Findings

We assume from the university website that there are transparent and clear procedures for recruiting teaching staff although we do not have detailed information. They have a sufficient number of permanent staff. There was evidence of staff collaborating in teaching and research with other HEI partners in Cyprus and abroad. The course regularly invites international staff to participate in their seminar programme. On the basis of the programme staffs' CVs, the staff are adequately qualified to ensure the quality of teaching and learning. There is a university teaching and learning centre which engages academics who teach the PhD programme in teaching skill training and development.

Strengths

There are many strengths identified in the above description (see above). There is a good, highly personalised relationship between academic staff and students. The academic staff have been successful in securing external funding and attracting international colleagues to share the research and teaching.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

We did not know whether there is a formal assessment process for teaching staff, however, there is course evaluation and we assume that this is used to review and improve teaching quality. There could be more explicit and transparent criteria for recruitment and development of teaching staff. In addition, there was not enough explicit information about the assessment of staff's quality of teaching and research.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the EEC for recognising that there are clear and transparent procedures for recruiting teaching staff, that the staff is engaged in teacher professional learning activities, and that there are collaborations with teaching staff from other countries. We are also content to know that the EEC recognises the highly personalised relationship between academic staff and students, and the fact that the academic staff is successful in securing external funding and attracting international colleagues to share the research and teaching.

In relation to the EEC's concerns about the formal procedures of assessing courses, recruiting and developing staff, and the assessment of staff in the quality of research and teaching, we would like to clarify that:

The Centre for Teaching and Learning of the University of Cyprus runs the formal assessment process for courses and instructors. There is an online questionnaire that all students are required to submit in order to be able to have access to their final grades. Although the students have the right to open the questionnaire and submit it without evaluating the course and the instructor, most students fill it in. The instructors and the head of the Department receive the evaluation and discuss whether the course and the approach followed by the instructor needs to be improved.

There are transparent criteria for recruiting staff and a process that safeguards that the decision for recruiting staff is transparent and collective. The process is as follows: In order to attract as many candidates as possible who meet the requirements of each position, announcements are published in both printable and electronic media to cover the local and international labour markets including international scientific journals the Cyprus Government Gazette, daily press and the University of Cyprus website.

The vacancy announcement describes in detail the content of the job, the minimum qualifications required, the subject field, the academic grade as well as the salary scale.

Evaluation Procedure:

- Appointment from the senate of a 5 member Review Committee with 3 external members (professors) coming from universities of at least two different countries
- Evaluation of the candidate's academic profile from the members of the committee and three other independent reviewers
- Face to Face interview

The report of the evaluation committee and its recommendation can be accepted or rejected initially by the Faculty committee and then by the senate

In relation to the development of the teaching staff, the Centre for Teaching and Learning of the University of Cyprus provides seminars and day conferences for the staff (e.g. how to use research into teaching, how to link assignment topics with research, etc.). However, participation in these seminars is voluntary. In addition, the staff has adequate funding to attend conferences which also offer professional development in their area of interest.

In what follows, we provide a list of schemes/practices that encourage professional development.

- Research funding for participation in international conferences, for developing internal research programs through a competitive process, for developing research infrastructures (laboratories, equipment), for establishing and operationalising research centres / units and for co-funding external research programs.
- Administrative support for the submission of proposals and financial management of research programs
- Sabbatical leave for the purpose of conducting research and enriching knowledge
- Possibility to participate in the decision-making bodies (Councils of the Department, School, Committees, Senate, Electoral Bodies, Evaluation and Staff Election Committees)
- Unpaid leave for a period of up to one academic year in order to work in another university or to engage in research or other serious professional and/or personal reasons

Explicit and transparent criteria about the assessment of staff's quality in teaching and research.

Evaluation Procedure:

- Appointment from the senate of a 5 member Review Committee with 3 external members (professors) coming from universities of at least two different countries
- Evaluation of the candidate's academic profile from the members of the committee and three other independent reviewers

- Face to Face interview

The report of the evaluation committee and its recommendation can be accepted or rejected initially by the Faculty committee and then by the senate

4. Students (ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)

EEC's comments

Findings

There are published regulations about student admission, progression and certification. The programme has clear admission processes. Students receive certifications with explanation of their qualifications they have achieved. There are mechanisms for complaint management and dispute resolution (Section 1.1.12 in the Postgraduate Study Rules).

Strengths

The students we interviewed expressed strong satisfaction with the programme. High value is placed on the recognition of previous staff and student experience. Students' mobility is promoted, although the numbers involved are not clear. There seems to be a strong emphasis on student support and welfare services. The university provides support for students with disabilities through central services. The programme covers or provides for the needs of students with disabilities or disadvantaged backgrounds. Student mobility is encouraged in the form of travel, attending conferences and financial support. Prior learning and work experience is taken into account in the admission process based on what we learned in the staff interviews.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

So far, only two PhD students have graduated and 11 are still studying. The relationship between the breadth and depth of the academic research interests and the students research topics is something to reflect upon. If they wanted to develop a particular area, they might consider defining the students' research topics in this area, e.g. advertise studentship in a particular area. Another option would be linking a students' research topic to an existing research project.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the EEC for recognising that admission and support of students to the programme is conducted with increased responsibility. We will consider the EEC's suggestion to advertise studentships and link students' research topic to existing research projects

5. Resources (ESG 1.6)

EEC's comments

Findings

From the evidence presented, adequate and readily accessible resources seem to be available. We assume that in changing circumstances available resources are still adequate. We consider the resources fit-for-purpose and students are informed about the services available for them. Teaching staff are involved in the acquiring of materials and resources.

Strengths

There is a lab for research teaching and teacher professional learning with computers, AAC devices, books and games.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The academic team might consider providing students with software licenses for their personal computers in order to be able to work outside the campus / laboratory.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the EEC for acknowledging that there are adequate and ready to use resources for students, and a very well equipped research and teaching lab.

In relation to the EEC's suggestion to provide students with software license for their personal computers, we would like to clarify that we make sure that licenses for any software are ordered for students who ask for them. We will make sure this information is clear and is included in the general information provided for the course.

6. Additional for distance learning programmes (ALL ESG)

N/A

7. Additional for doctoral programmes (ALL ESG)

EEC's comments

Findings

There are specific criteria that students need to meet for the PhD programme and selection procedures are clearly defined. The doctoral course involves three of the core courses of the MA programme. Students who have completed the MA programme are exempted from three of the four courses. We were unsure if the double counting of three courses is consistent with university practices. The programme has set a minimum and maximum time period for completion. There are also clear procedures for accepting or rejecting students' proposals. There are stated criteria for attaining a PhD degree (i.e. making contribution to knowledge), which raise questions whether there might also be other criteria for a PhD (see under recommendations). There is a minimum word limit in the PhD thesis, but no maximum. We were told that students are told informally that the dissertation is between 80'000 and 100'000 words. There is guidelines about the binding, cover page, introduction, including pages confirming the authenticity and originality of the dissertation. There is a plagiarism check system in place. There are clear guidelines about the composition, procedure and criteria for the advisory committee. Likewise, there are respective guidelines for the examination committee. The supervisor chairperson's duties are clarified. At present there are only 11 students registered, with two students having graduated in the past.

Strengths

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Areas of improvement and recommendations

The criteria for accepting a thesis could be added to the current criteria, for example, that the thesis should be presented in an adequate format and literary style or that the research should be based on full understanding and analysis of the existing literature.

The programme team could pay attention to the needs of MA students who progressed to the PhD programme and have to repeat one module they already did at the master level. The staff need to be clear about the progression they offer to MA students who go on to the PhD programme.

We were not clear about the selection and involvement of external examiners and their contribution to ensuring the above-mentioned criteria (i.e. the creation of new knowledge). We were unclear if the Centre for Teaching and Learning of the University of Cyprus is involved in training and supporting academic staff's supervision skills.

The academic staff could develop some sessions about developing understanding of ethical issues in research at doctoral level.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the EEC for identifying a number of positive aspects in our PhD programme. In relation to the remarks of the EEC, we would like to clarify the following issues:

Recognising 3 master courses as part of the PhD programme falls within the University of Cyprus policy.

The thesis needs to be presented in an adequate format and literary style, and the research should be based on full understanding and analysis of the existing literature. These are criteria for doctoral thesis and the extent to which they apply in the thesis is commented in the minutes that follow the support of the thesis.

The staff makes sure that the MA graduates that progress to the PhD develop further. Therefore, they make sure that if they need to repeat a module they have different readings and more advanced assignments that require data collection and extensive reading of the literature.

The doctoral thesis is examined by a committee comprised of five members. Two of the committee members are external examiners.

The academic staff organizes sessions in which many issues that are relevant to doctoral research are discussed (i.e. ethical issues, handling large data, negotiating data and data analysis, etc.). Frequently, we invite professors from other universities to visit Cyprus with the Erasmus programme or other schemes, and we organize sessions that target our doctoral students.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning is not involved in developing and supporting the supervisors' skills. This could be a suggestion to the Centre.

8. Additional for joint programmes (ALL ESG)

N/A

B. Conclusions and final remarks

EEC's comments

In conclusion, in all general areas, we found the PhD programme compliant with the standards. In most cases on the individual standards, we have given individual ratings of 4 or 5, in very few places we have given a rating of 3 with remarks on how to improve the current situation. Our recommendation is to accredit the PhD programme “Special and Inclusive Education”.

We would like to express our thanks to the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, to the management of the university, to the academic and administrative staff as well as to the students.

HEI's response

We would like to thank the committee for these final remarks. As identified to each evaluation section above, we will take into account the suggestions for improving the quality of our programme.

Higher Education Institution academic representatives

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Leonidas Kyriakides	Professor, Chair of the Department	
Eleni Phtiaka	Professor, Coordinator	

Date:4/5/20.....

TABLE 1: TEACHING STAFF

A/A	Name and Surname	Discipline / Specialization	Teaching courses in the program of study under evaluation (PhD, Special and Inclusive Education)		
			Code	Course title	Hour Periods/ week
1.	Helen Phtiaka	Sociology of Education and Inclusive Education	EDU 542	Special and Inclusive Education in Cyprus	3
			EDU 639	Inclusive Education: the new face of special education?	3
2.	Simoni Symeonidou	Inclusive Education	EDU 545	Disability in the society and at school	3
			EDU 546	Differentiation in the inclusive classroom	3
3.	Charalambos Charalambous	Educational Research and Evaluation	EDU 683	Educational Statistics with Statistical Packages Applications	3
4.	Elena Ioannidou	Language Education	EDU 520	Discourse Analysis	3
5.	Stavroula Kontovourki	Language Education	EDU 520	Discourse Analysis	3
6.	Leonidas Kyriakides	Educational Research and Evaluation	EDU 788	Advanced Research Methods	3

9.	New Member of Staff	Educational Research and Evaluation	EDU 682	Qualitative Research in Education	3
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