



Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 18/10/2024

Higher Education Institution's Response

- **Higher Education Institution:**

Open University of Cyprus

- **Town:** Nicosia

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

In Greek:

ΠΝΥΚΑ: Πολιτική Ιστορία, Θεωρία και Πράξη (3 academic semesters, 90 ECTS, Postgraduate / Masters Programme)

In English:

PNYX: Political History, Theory and Practice

- **Language(s) of instruction:** Greek

- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating

- **Concentrations (if any):**

In Greek: N/A

In English: N/A



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 2021 [L.136(I)/2015 – L.132(I)/2021].

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 or 300.1.1/1 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area. The answers' documentation should be brief and accurate and supported by the relevant documentation. Referral to annexes should be made only when necessary.*
- *In particular, under each assessment area and by using the 2nd column of each table, the HEI must respond on the following:*
 - *the areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
 - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The institution should respond to the EEC comments, in the designated area next each comment. The comments of the EEC should be copied from the EEC report **without any interference** in the content.*
- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on separate document(s). Each document should be in *.pdf format and named as annex1, annex2, etc.*

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development (ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

Areas of improvement and recommendations by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
<p>The EEC is concerned with the lack of an obligatory MA thesis, as this would help students to become more active in systematic, in-depth research and prepare them for further studies. An alternative would be the writing of a Policy paper of more or less the same length as the optional thesis (12,000-15,000 words). Important is that the students will not need to “sacrifice” courses in order to undertake an MA thesis as this is a disincentive.</p>	<p>The Academic Team of the MA “PNYX: Political History, Theory and Practice” would like to warmly thank the EEC for the very useful remarks and suggestions. The lack of an obligatory MA thesis is related to the general philosophy of the MA and its aim to provide a broad and interdisciplinary political education encompassing many different aspects of politics. The best way for providing such a broad education is through the respective Modules of the MA that cover many different areas of history, theory, economics, law, rhetoric, etc. The Master Thesis is optional for those students who may have an interest to pursue a particular research project or to improve their relevant research and professional skills. This option also serves as an opportunity for students to have an experience in applied research and explore the possibility to continue their studies towards a doctoral degree.</p> <p>Given the new, three-semester structure of the MA, a mandatory MA thesis would result in reducing the number of the Modules from six to four. This would inevitably result in limiting the range of the interdisciplinary knowledge provided by the MA. In relation to cultivating students’ research skills, even in the current form of the MA, they are effectively engaged in academic bibliographical research through the two written assignments which form a significant part of the evaluation of each Module of the MA. By the time of their graduation, students who have opted for a non-thesis master’s degree have written 12 academic assignments, which are equal to</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

	<p>c.36.000 words. In each assignment, students follow all the established rules of academic writing in terms of structure, bibliographical research and critical analysis of cases studies. We certainly agree with the EEC that semester assignments are not as suitable for in-depth research as are MA theses. However, they too have been proven to be an effective means for providing students with important research skills, especially taking into account the demographics of the majority of our student body (ca. 35-40 years of age on average, professionals, mostly with families. Another reason why we are at present inclined towards an optional MA thesis is the always difficult issue of the accreditation of identity and authorship. Students opting for a non-thesis master's degree have to sit a final exam for each Module, where proctoring and other fraud detection tools enable us to better ensure academic integrity. On the other hand, policy papers are an excellent idea suggested by the EEC that can be very fruitfully integrated in the current structure of our MA, e.g. as part of the interactive exercises or/and in the form of oral presentations.</p>	
<p>AI could be integrated in the curriculum as it happens in other academic programmes on order to address contemporary needs and concerns.</p>	<p>This is an interesting suggestion, which we shall explore; further details would be appreciated. Integrating AI into the curriculum requires a thoughtful and strategic approach, especially for a theory-oriented programme such as PNYX.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>The faculty members should be increased as the ratio between teachers and students is rather demanding for the members of the teaching staff that have to deal with many different activities of the programme.</p>	<p>It is true that there is only one faculty member in the MA (its academic director). It should be noted that this is common practice in open and distance teaching universities which cannot employ many permanent faculty members, especially at the OUC which is a public university, and all new academic</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

	<p>positions need to be approved by the State. Nevertheless, it is a very reasonable and welcome suggestion by the EEC that increasing the number of faculty members would allow them to focus more on research activities and better manage teaching and administrative workload. The OUC is always in the process of requesting more full-time permanent academic staff positions. A significant increase in the numbers of students of the MA as a result of its new three-semester structure and the expected decrease of tuition fees would probably pave the way for claiming more faculty member posts.</p>	
<p>Another issue of concern is the fact that the teachers and students of the programme do not have the opportunity to meet in-person in a conference or summer school especially designated for that. In person communication could help them discuss about strengths and weaknesses of the programme and enable them to network for future collaborations in the academic or professional field in all directions (teachers to teachers, teachers to students, students to students).</p>	<p>Due to the nature of digital distance learning, communication between tutors and students normally takes place through the asynchronous and synchronous distance learning platforms and tools. Nevertheless, in the five years of the operation of the MA there have been also instances of in-person meetings, e.g. in hybrid public lectures and guided visits in historical sites in Cyprus and Greece. An annual summer school is a great idea that would definitively further enhance in-person communication.</p> <p>However, it is important to note that the great geographical dispersal of our students and graduates, who live in many different places in Cyprus, Greece and elsewhere, poses organisational challenges (e.g. issues of travel funding). Nevertheless, the Academic Team of the MA shares the view of the EEC regarding in-person meetings and will always keep seeking opportunities to this purpose.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

2. Student – centred learning, teaching and assessment (ESG 1.3)

Areas of improvement and recommendations by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
<p>Our main concern is the absence of a mandatory Master’s thesis for all students. Cypriot law allows students to choose whether or not to complete a thesis, which can pose challenges for graduates seeking admission to PhD programs in other countries. Even if a student is not interested in an academic career, we believe they should have the opportunity to consolidate their acquired knowledge into a final project and defend it through an oral presentation. In fact, there are alternatives to a research-driven Master’s thesis, such as a professional thesis or a policy paper. However, we believe that students should integrate the skills and competencies learned throughout the programme into a final comprehensive work.</p>	<p>Please see our response on the same issue in the section 1. In addition, we would like to mention that already in the first, introductory teleconference of the MA, students are informed that if they would like to later pursue a PhD, it is advisable to choose a thesis master’s degree. Moreover, this advice is also included in the master’s thesis study guide, which is uploaded in the central communication eClass platform of the MA and is always accessible to all students. Certainly, following the suggestion of the EEC, we can further stress this important point to our students, since we definitively share the view that a high-quality research-driven MA thesis is a crucial precondition for pursuing a PhD.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>Evaluation is getting a big issue in online learning programs. Accreditation of identity and authorship is not an easy question. Although we think the OUC is doing a good job, it is of an extreme importance to go on working on the improvement in this field: double camera for the proctoring, oral exams, etc. are possible paths of improvement.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendations. OUC is using a) plagiarism detection software, Turnitin, to check all assignments submitted on its eLearning Platform, and b) proctoring software, Proctorio, for its final examinations. Proctorio ensures Identify verification, Originality verification, Content protection, etc. Face detection is used to detect the presence of one or more humans in the room, or if the student has left the exam for any reason. The OUC does not consider oral examinations as suitable for a distance teaching university.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

Areas of improvement and recommendations by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
<p>Our committee wants to point out that the balance between adjunct faculty and permanent faculty in the programme seems out of sync.</p>	<p>Please see our response on the same issue in the section 1. Following the restructuring of the MA, there will be 6 Modules, and 1 is taught by the Program’s Director who is a permanent OUC faculty member. In addition, we would like to mention that this issue is to some extent counterbalanced by the long-lasting collaboration of the MA with a team of highly experienced and committed adjunct tutors. This collaboration takes place on many different levels, e.g. of teaching synergies, organisation of academic lectures and events (e.g. guided historical visits), participation in joint research publications, submission of joint research proposals, etc. Consequently, the collaboration between permanent faculty and adjunct faculty goes beyond the teaching process of each Module.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>There is a considerable weakness that comes with the University and programme being strongly dependent on external research activities and hence academic seniority of the teaching staff. Should some tutors accept positions elsewhere, it is unclear how continuity of the link between research and education within the courses and hence the programme could be warranted. Solutions are too dependent on individual availability of expertise in tutors and hence not sufficiently sustainable as part of the internal organization and research focus on the institution</p>	<p>This is a reasonable concern of the EEC. The expertise of individual tutors contributes significantly to the quality and depth of education and research-led teaching. However, the OUC has taken several steps to ensure that the program remains robust and sustainable, even in the face of potential staff changes. Our main tool for tackling this problem are the ranking lists of adjunct tutors. Every three years the teaching positions in all programmes of study of the OUC are advertised, candidate tutors submit their applications, and the best candidates are included and classified in ranking lists according to their qualifications, teaching and</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

	<p>research experience, and availability. Ranking lists are valid for three academic years and during this period the OUC, based on its needs, selects the adjunct tutors for each Module for each academic semester. The Tutors who are performing well, based on students' evaluations and the MA Director's own evaluation, are offered renewal contracts. Based on the ranking lists, if the top-ranked candidate of a specific Module does not accept the teaching position, then the position is offered to the next candidate on the ranking list. The ranking lists of all modules of our MA include many experienced and highly qualified candidate adjunct tutors. Consequently, if needed, these tutors can effectively replace the current adjunct tutors of our MA.</p>	
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4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification (ESG 1.4)

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<p>The Vice-Rector and the Head of Academic Affairs have explained to the committee that the programme faces some challenges with regard to international recognition of this (and other) remote programmes of teaching. Although the diploma finds recognition within the European Higher Education area and is received well in extra-academic fields in that same area, there are institutions outside of Europe who do not recognize a full status to the diplomacy, Open University of China was mentioned as an example. Here, the solution should be sought at state and European level diplomacy regarding higher education. We recommend that the Open University of Cyprus keep bringing this issue to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth which should actively stand for this within Europe and in international negotiations regarding such matters. Also, representations could be made through embassies with regard to the need to have the MA Program recognized</p>	<p>The Open University of Cyprus is a public University, and all its programmes of study are accredited by the Cyprus Quality Assurance Agency (CyQAA). As a public European University, all OUC degrees are recognized within the EU. The issue with the recognition of distance learning degrees in third countries is associated with restrictions in particular countries that do not recognize online education. Given that the MA is currently offered in Greek, the fact that OUC degrees might not be recognized in third countries is not an issue or a threat. The University has already communicated this info to the department of Higher Education of the Cypriot Ministry of Education.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>The establishment and strengthening of the academic advisor system would significantly benefit both students and the academic program. A well-structured advising framework ensures that students receive appropriate guidance on course selection, degree planning, and academic progress, ultimately promoting timely graduation and academic success. Moreover, fostering a clear understanding among students about the role and</p>	<p>We absolutely agree with the suggestion of the EEC regarding the academic advisor system. Although academic guidance is constantly provided also by the MA Director and the adjunct tutors, an important aim of our MA is to broaden our collaboration with the Academic Advisor of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in order to promote all the goals rightly described by the EEC. This would certainly help us to tackle the dropping out problem, which at the</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

<p>availability of academic advisors would enhance their ability to address academic and life challenges. This may help address the dropping out problem.</p>	<p>moment is fortunately not very acute in our MA.</p>	
<p>In addition, the organization of an online open day for prospective students may help the students understand how to make well-informed decisions about their choice of program and get a clearer picture of the context of the program.</p>	<p>This is a very good suggestion of the EEC that we will definitely take into account. At University-level, online info days do take place and are organized by the University for student recruitment (the most recent one was held in May 2024). Concerning this particular MA, in addition to two public online presentations (in 2020 and 2021) and several online open days organised in the past by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences for promoting all its programmes of study, the faculty members of the School are currently discussing the perspective of organising a hybrid open day for prospective students in Athens.</p>	
<p>It would be advantageous to explore potential collaborative models employed by comparable academic institutions and research centres, to foster productive partnerships.</p>	<p>A Memorandum of Understanding is currently being prepared between our MA and the Cyprus Society of Historical Studies for initiating an academic collaboration. We would be very happy to seek further collaborations with other Cypriot, Greek and foreign institutions, as we completely share the view of the EEC.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>Students could be more actively encouraged to take advantage of opportunities such as Erasmus+ programs or internships. Engaging with practical, real-world experiences would offer them a more solid foundation for their academic and professional development</p>	<p>This is indeed something that we can more actively pursue through a more close collaboration with the OUC Mobility Office of the OUC. All OUC students are encouraged to explore Erasmus+ Student Mobility options for Studies or Internships. We should bear in mind however that most MA students are professionals, many of them with families, and that as a result Erasmus+ mobility is not attractive to them. To address this matter and offer additional incentives, recently, OUC has submitted a request to the Cypriot</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

	<p>National Agency to characterise “working people” as “people with fewer opportunities” so that they may be able to apply for short-term mobilities (5-30 working days). Furthermore, our MA provides students with the opportunity to attend the Module ΠΙΘ695/696: Industry Placement for supplementing their degree with practical professional development. There is certainly scope for more actively encouraging students to take advantage of these opportunities.</p>	
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5. Learning resources and student support (ESG 1.6)

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<p>The EEC finds that the low number of full-time teachers might pose a risk if they do not maintain a balance between teaching, research, and innovation.</p>	<p>Please see our responses on this issue in the sections 1 and 3. In addition, we would like to note that we absolutely share the concern of the EEC about the balance between teaching, research and innovation. Another factor negatively affecting this balance and the engagement of both members of the permanent staff and adjunct tutors in research and innovation is the administrative and bureaucratic workload. A possible decrease of these nonteaching and non-research duties would in fact have a positive effect as a possible increase in the number of full-time tutors. On the other hand, as pointed out above, new faculty positions have to be approved by the State; with our current number of permanent staff, there is no other option but to share the administrative burden as equitably as possible.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>Another risk is the reliance on too many external resources. The University does not control these resources and may face issues if, for instance, they are removed or if the licensing terms change</p>	<p>If the EEC's remark on our reliance on external resources concerns the Library, please note that OUC is providing access to all necessary resources through MyAthens and licenses to all relevant journals and databases. If the comment refers to eLearning tools, or other software, such as Turnitin, Proctorio, etc., there is no such risk given that OUC is securing all funds needed for licenses of software which support its educational processes. Please also note that educational material is updated on a regular basis, so if a particular resource becomes unavailable, it is immediately replaced by alternative resources.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>We believe that extending the synchronous teleconferences to 3</p>	<p>This is an interesting and useful suggestion by the EEC that we will</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

<p>hours might be beneficial as it enables more comprehensive discussion and longer presentations by guest speakers.</p>	<p>definitely take into account. In the present state of operation of the MA, there are already instances in which teleconferences are de facto extended to almost three hours. Our present intention is to mainly retain the present duration of 2-2,5 hours and in exceptional cases of greater teaching workload to extend it to three hours.</p>	
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6. Additional for doctoral programmes
 (ALL ESG)

Areas of improvement and recommendations by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
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7. Eligibility (Joint programme) (ALL ESG)

Areas of improvement and recommendations by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
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B. Conclusions and final remarks

Conclusions and final remarks by EEC	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
<p>We find the teaching staff to be qualitative, skilled, very well prepared and experts in their respective subjects. However, despite this clear strength, the number of permanent academic staff is limited. Actually, there is only one permanent faculty member in this MA programme and he, as well as the rest of the teaching staff have many responsibilities in this program, are active in research and may be involved in other programs offered by the OUC. We believe that increasing the number of permanent teachers would allow them to focus more on research and innovation activities, spend more time with the students and enhance their subjects.</p>	<p>We would like to warmly thank the EEC for the very positive assessment of our teaching staff. We also thank the EEC for the suggestion that the number of the permanent academic staff members should be increased. This would be certainly an excellent perspective for both the MA and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Along with a significant increase in the numbers of students of the MA as a result of its new three-semester structure and the expected decrease of tuition fees, the present suggestion of the EEC will be an important argument of the OUC and our MA for claiming for more faculty member posts.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>The University demonstrates its commitment to evaluation as a critical aspect, particularly when certifying students' knowledge. We encourage the university to continue evolving its control systems to prevent fraud.</p>	<p>We definitely share the EEC's concern about evaluation and we will keep working on further developing our control systems. Furthermore, in collaboration with our Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology we are constantly trying to provide our tutors with all necessary knowledge and skills for addressing modern high-tech challenges to academic integrity, such as ChatGPT and other AI applications.</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>
<p>It should be noted that the students are very positive about the programme, but they still share our concern about the lack of an obligatory MA thesis that would enable them to gain in-depth knowledge about a specific topic and pursue further studies. We advice the MA Programme to re-consider this issue.</p>	<p>We are very happy that students' satisfaction with our MA has been expressed also in their discussions with the EEC. Although most of our students have hitherto opted for a non-thesis master's degree, we will keep supporting in the best of our abilities every student who chooses a thesis master's degree. We will also keep striving to always make clear to our students how crucial a</p>	<p>Choose level of compliance:</p>

	<p>research-driven MA thesis is for the perspective of a Ph.D. Moreover, we will be very happy to integrate the great idea of policy papers to our current teaching and Module structure. We will always have in mind the suggestion of the EEC regarding an obligatory MA thesis and we are open to reconsidering this perspective, especially if our students show an increased interest in thesis master's degrees in the following years. Finally, we would like once again to warmly thank the EEC for all the fruitful discussions, useful suggestions and constructive recommendations that significantly support our efforts to develop our MA in the best possible way in the years to come.</p>	
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C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Assistant Professor Theodoros Giannopoulos	Programme Director	
Professor Vayos Liapis	Vice Rector, Chair of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Associate Professor Antonis Zorpas	Member of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Associate Professor Vayia Karaïskou	Member of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Assistant Professor Antonis Kafa	Member of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Elena Gregoriou	Member of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee, Head of the OUC Academic Affairs & Student Welfare Services	
Erato Ioanna Sarri	Member of the OUC Internal Quality Assurance Committee, Quality Assurance Office	

Date: 18/10/2024

