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Doc. 300.1.2

Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: July 5, 2021

- Higher Education Institution:
 Open University of Cyprus
- Town: Nicosia
- Programme of study
 Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)

In Greek:

Μεταπτυχιακό Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών επιπέδου Μάστερ στις «Θεατρικές Σπουδές» In English:

Magister Artium (MA) Theatre Studies

- Language(s) of instruction: Greek
- Programme's status: Currently running, registered but not evaluated.
- Concentrations (if any):

In Greek: 1) Επιβίωση του αρχαίου δράματος· 2) Θεατρική αγωγή, 3) Υποκριτική και σκηνοθεσία. In English: 1) Reception of ancient drama; 2) Theatre

in education; 3) Acting and Directing.

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 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.
- 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 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 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4).
- 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, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

Findings

It is clear that appropriate internal quality assurance procedures are in place, involving students, academic staff, the administration team (including an internal Quality Assurance committee) and both the Dean and the Rector.

Courses are subject to annual review and student feedback on both courses and tutors is used to shape the ongoing development of the course.

The programme of study is consistent with the student body and their educational needs and the content largely meets the objectives set out by the programme. It corresponds to the EQF.

There is a logical progression from core modules which give theoretical and methodological foundations, through elective modules that allow for specialisation in a named pathway, to a dissertation that allows for a clear demonstration of independent learning and the tailoring of substantial individual projects. The possibility for those projects to incorporate aspects of professional experience and prior experiential learning is a strength.

The combination of pathways offers a variety of potential routes out of the programme: further academic study, including at doctoral level; work in theatre and in theatre-related areas such as cultural and heritage organisations; teaching and education, including professional development. The possibility of students completing more than one elective pathway and coming out with more than one named qualification is striking and positive.

There is clear evidence that the programme of study contributes to the development of student communication, teamwork and entrepreneurial skills, particularly in the courses devoted to the practices of Acting and Directing.

Data on graduation rates was not presented in sufficient detail for the panel to make a firm evaluation, but there is evidence of good levels of graduation and relative low drop-out rates.

The Study Guides enable students to direct and manage their own learning and workloads and give clear indications of how this can be done.

Details of the courses offered are available on the programme website.

Most students enrolled are already in professional positions which means that graduate outcomes cannot readily be measured in straightforward terms (such as employment obtained, etc.). The

programme team are seeking to maintain stronger alumni relations in the future so as to more accurately understand graduate outcomes.

Strengths

The principal strengths of the programme as regards its quality assurance processes include:

- coherent course design with excellent logic for progression
- impressive study guides to ensure student-centred learning
- robust administrative processes
- strong institutional understanding of the value of iterative processes, which is shared by all relevant staff

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Delivery in the Greek language is both a strength of the course – since it is genuinely distinctive – but also brings with it some limitations. The international ambitions of the institution and programme are inevitably circumscribed by the linguistic demands, but there is also a consequence in terms of the material available in Greek translation for curriculum development.

This pragmatic problem is not easily resolved, but will need to be acknowledged in setting realistic goals for expansion of the programme.

Recommendations:

- Some work could be done to make more key data publicly available (e.g. teaching, learning and assessment procedures, pass and drop-out rates, career paths of graduates).
- The feedback loop could be completed more effectively to give students a stronger sense that their experiences are making a strong contribution to the continuing development of the programme.

OUC Response

In response to the EEC's suggestion to make more key data publicly available, it should be noted that there is a **basic description** (in Greek) **of each module on the Programme's webpage** (https://www.ouc.ac.cy/index.php/el/studies/programmes/master/master-tsp). This description includes information on course structure, on individual modules (including assessment requirements), on potential professional pathways, etc. In accordance to the EEC's recommendation, we propose to enrich those descriptions with further details, such as learning outcomes, module structure, basic bibliography etc.

Pass and dropout rates as well as career paths of graduates will need to be supplied by the Student and Programme's Support Unit. These will be monitored in a systematic manner in accordance with university policy.

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Also, a university-wide policy is already in place whereby **anonymous student feedback** is requested at the end of each semester, with emphasis on areas of potential improvement. A possible matter of concern here is that, as experience has shown, students hesitate or neglect to provide feedback, for various reasons. Also, there have been cases in which feedback was provided mainly by students who were either strongly satisfied or strongly dissatisfied with module content or delivery; this inevitably led to biased results, which were likely to misrepresent student views.

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

Findings

The programme represents a compelling example of an inventive use of distance learning pedagogies and modes of delivery in an academic area that conventionally presents particular difficulties due to its associations with liveness and the co-presence of performers and audiences.

The emphasis on student-centered pedagogical approaches is valuable and, on the evidence of those students who participated in the virtual site visit, is recognised and appreciated by the students.

Expectations are clearly set for both synchronous and asynchronous learning, and sound plans and processes are in place to ensure positive interaction among students between students and staff. Clear evidence of the effectiveness of these plans and processes emerged during the evaluation meeting.

Students appear well-informed and supported in their engagement with learning technologies.

A good variety of pedagogical methods are used.

Students are active in shaping their own work, managing their workloads and contributing to dialogue and shared experience. There is a high degree of autonomy for students.

Learning paths are appropriately flexible, with the diverse needs of students with busy professional lives and family responsibilities substantially accommodated by the structure of the programme.

There is an appropriate procedure for handling and responding to student complaints.

Practical training is not a primary focus of this programme, but it should be noted that there is impressive evidence of students taking their study into practical and professional environments.

Assessment is well-designed, with clear criteria, transparency, fair application, and clearly contributes in a structured way to the development of student learning and the progressive acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Standards set are high, entirely in keeping with the EQF, with students asked to engage with demanding material. This is supported by the excellence of the comprehensive structured study guides, which include clear learning outcomes and regular opportunities for students to evaluate their own progress and learning.

Strengths

Open University of Cyprus has almost 20 years' experience in delivering Distance Learning programmes and courses.

There are clear policies and applicable practices for integrating new technology in Distance Learning and for student-centred pedagogy.

Organisational structures and procedures are in place for training and supporting teachers and students in e-learning.

There is clear evidence of a responsive programme, as evidenced, for example, in the focus on refugee experience and narrative in the acting and directing components.

Flexibility of the programme in terms of timescales for completion is admirable, appropriate and necessary for distance learning of this kind.

The focus on student-centred learning approaches and methodologies provides a valuable underpinning for the programme as a whole, and is flexible enough to allow for distinctive elective pathways to develop out of a shared theoretical core. The combination of formal presentations (synchronous and asynchronous), synchronous seminars and events, highly detailed and clear study guides, self-evaluation exercises, peer critique and discussion boards suggests a programme that is open to a variety of learning styles as well as to a range of competences and experience. The variety of forms of assessment reflects this commitment to student-centred learning, particularly in the possibility for professional and practice-based elements in dissertations.

This is facilitated by a developing use of technologies appropriate to an e-learning environment, and tutors highlighted the possibilities created by the adoption of new platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate.

The self-evaluation elements – allowing students to identify and address their own areas to focus on – are not formally monitored by tutors, but this seems appropriate for postgraduate study, in which the responsibility for independent learning is the students' own. This is also good preparation for written work, including dissertations.

The student-centered activities beyond the core curriculum are clearly excellent: the "Monday" series (online lectures by guest lecturers), workshops run by students, and a blog with reviews by students. Students are encouraged to benefit from the Erasmus+ programme.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Recommendations:

• One of the key changes to the revised curriculum is the move from year-long modules to semester-long modules. This may create complexities in the development of cohorts, particularly for collaborative work, since it will introduce further flexibility in the timescale for completion of the course. This can't be avoided – and this flexibility is one of strengths and attractions of e-learning programmes – but its potential effects will have to be carefully monitored to avoid students becoming isolated through falling out of sync with their initial cohort.

One possible solution would be to introduce further moments of synchronous contact (some exist already), but specifically designed to be independent of specific modules or pathways in order to bring students together from across the programme and at different stages of completion.

A variety of strategies to promote cohort development might be used to supplement what is already a carefully-considered programme. It is clear that informal versions of such activities already exist, coming from the students and using social media, but it is inevitably difficult to know how inclusive this is of the whole student body. One possibility would be to formalise a 'buddy' system, in which pairs of students would support each other through structured activities involving collaboration and feedback. Alternatively, a Dissertation proposal workshop in which abstracts of proposed topics would be presented for peer feedback, allowing both for refinement of proposals and offering students at earlier stages a sense of where they are aiming. While it may appear counter-intuitive, offering a non-compulsory short, intensive summer school/symposium open to students at all stages may be advantageous.

- For any e-learning and distance learning programme with inclusive and international ambitions, the issue of digital poverty is pressing, and will only be exacerbated as more sophisticated learning platforms are developed. It would be advisable to include consideration of this issue in institutional and programme-specific annual monitoring, and for it to act as a guiding principle in programme development to ensure accessibility.
- Strengthen interactivity between students by adopting peer-reviewing assignments and making them mandatory. This method means that students will upload their work, give feedback to each other and upload it, while receiving support by their teachers. All this implies communication between students and between students and teachers in a natural way.
- Asynchronous activities are important in Distance Learning. Although recorded lectures and seminars allow students to watch them anytime they are not enough for this need. More learning activities should be designed to be asynchronous, as for example peer-reviewing.
- In responding to questions about the nature of the curriculum, two aspects became apparent:
 first, that there is more diversity within the programme than currently appears to be the case,
 and this suggests that a different emphasis could be given in the course materials in order to
 make this more apparent; second, that there is a sense of student expectation that, while no
 doubt partially real in the history of the course to date, is perhaps going to come under

increasing pressure as student expectations shift. This is likely to prove an increasingly important factor affecting the international ambitions of the programme.

OUC Response

- 1. We welcome the EEC's suggestion to encourage interaction among students from across the programme, as this will further reduce feelings of isolation one of the biggest challenges distance-learning programmes have to face. We are particularly grateful for two specific suggestions by the EEC: namely, "to formalise a 'buddy' system, in which pairs of students would support each other through structured activities involving collaboration and feedback" and to organize "a Dissertation proposal workshop in which abstracts of proposed topics would be presented for peer feedback" (p. 19 of the EEC report). More specifically, we propose to implement these suggestions as follows:
 - i. A version of the 'buddy' system is already built into the interactive activities we recently designed, in which we have deliberately included a collaboration and mutual-feedback requirement. But we shall also endeavour to integrate this system into the written assessment too, by asking pairs of students to share and comment on each other's assignments after formally submitting them on the eClass eLearning Platform. This can be achieved by a combination of two mutually reinforcing methods: (i) asynchronously, by having students upload their assignments on the eClass discussion forum for feedback by their peers after submitting them formally for assessment by tutors; (ii) synchronously, by holding Blackboard online sessions, monitored by tutors, in which pairs of students may discuss each other's assignments (after these have been formally submitted) and offer self-evaluation comments on their own assignments. Tutors will also provide their own feedback.
 - ii. The Dissertation proposal workshop can take place shortly after the end of each semester, following the exam period, which is when students usually start thinking about dissertation topics. Prior to the workshop, a number of possible research topics will have been made available to students, so that the workshop may be dedicated to a discussion of each student's ideas as well as to possibly under-researched or under-theorised areas, with the participation of both tutors and students. For practical reasons, it will probably be advisable to run three parallel workshops, each one of them focusing on dissertations in the respective concentration (Reception of Ancient Drama, Theatre Education, Acting and Directing).
- 2. The issue of digital poverty raised in the EEC report is indeed a serious and pressing one. This is a matter we have already taken into account in the design and development of our programme; it is also integrated into the University's educational methodology as a whole. For one thing, the University's eLearning platforms (eClass and Blackboard Collaborate) require no special software to be installed and are available to anyone with a moderately reliable Internet connection; digital literacy requirements are also kept to a minimum, as both platforms are largely intuitive although it should be stressed that detailed instructions and training videos are

available to all students and faculty. For another, eClass allows tutors to monitor each individual student's online activity by offering detailed data on such matters as last login, duration of online activity, etc. Thus, tutors are able to take appropriate measures whenever a student seems to fall behind.

- 3. We also welcome the EEC's suggestion that we make peer-reviewing of assignments mandatory. We have already indicated our willingness to do so in paragraph 1(i) above. In accordance with the EEC's recommendations, we propose to adopt a combination of asynchronous and synchronous peer-reviewing, whereby students will upload drafts of their assignments on the eClass discussion forum (after these have been formally submitted for evaluation by tutors), so that they are available to their peers for review, and will then discuss each other's drafts in a subsequent Blackboard Collaborate session, which will be monitored by a tutor.
- 4. In response to the EEC's suggestion that more learning activities should be designed to be asynchronous, we have included a strong asynchronous component in the newly designed interactive activities, in which (as pointed out above, in paragraph 1(i)) we have made student collaboration and mutual-feedback mandatory. Also, as pointed out above (paragraph 3), we propose to make peer-reviewing of draft assignments mandatory, on an asynchronous as well as a synchronous basis.
- 5. In response to the EEC's recommendation for greater diversity in the authors and approaches included in the curriculum, so that proper account is taken of potential shifts in student expectations, we shall make an even greater effort to address the diversity issue through students' assignments and creative projects a practice we are already following to some extent. Given that the MA thesis will be mandatory for all students, we shall also make sure that the dissertation topics will reflect a greater diversity in theoretical approaches. Also, we shall attempt to accommodate and even encourage shifts in student expectations by more rigorously exposing them to different ways of understanding and analysing theatre, and by giving them the opportunity to engage with emergent (as opposed to established) trends in theatre and performance theory and practice. To this purpose, we propose to organize seminars by theatre practitioners and theorists, whose work manifests a strong engagement with non-mainstream forms and methods.
- 6. Finally, as a way of promoting interactivity among our students, we propose to integrate twelve (12) interactive activities into each semester module and to revise, accordingly, our assessment methods for all modules as follows:
 - One (1) compulsory written assignment per semester module (to be submitted by week 10): 30% of the final mark. Written assignments are graded on a numerical scale from 0 to 10 (with 0.5 gradations). In order to sit the final exam, students will need to obtain a minimum of 5 out of 10 at the written exam. Failing this, students can submit a second (2nd) written

assignment by week 12; the second written assignment is graded in the same way as the first.

- Twelve (12) interactive activities (one per weekly unit): 10% of the final mark. Interactive
 activities are graded on a pass/fail basis. Students need to complete a minimum of 10 such
 activities in order to be able to sit the final exam.
- A final exam at the end of each semester: 60% of the final mark. In order to sit the final exam, students need to have submitted at least one written assignment (graded 5/10 as a minimum requirement) and at least 10 interactive activities. The final exam is graded on a numerical scale from 0 to 100.

3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

Findings

The teaching staff are well-qualified and recruited in line with the learning outcomes sought. The processes for their recruitment and development are appropriate.

There is evidence that teaching staff are engaged in professional development in both pedagogy and research and that they are highly capable in their use of learning technologies.

There are mandatory introductory courses for teaching staff focusing on interaction and the specificities of e-learning.

There is a good balance of teaching and research, with teaching staff making substantial contributions to research in theatre studies in both Greek and English, in national and international contexts, including numerous collaborative projects and publications.

Their research expertise is clearly visible in curriculum content and methodological approaches.

Teaching performance is assessed and evaluated at course level and as part of annual reviews.

Strengths

The quality and commitment of the teaching staff is probably the greatest strength of the programme.

The teaching materials are comprehensive, varied and clearly in a process of continuous revision and development, including responsiveness to student experience.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

While recognising that the use of adjunct faculty is accepted practice in such distance learning programmes, it would be good to ensure the stability and sustainability of the programme through a move towards a rebalancing of the ratio of established to adjunct faculty.

There is a need for continuous adaptation and revision of the training and support provided to teachers.

Training and support for teachers could more clearly focus on the pedagogical possibilities and problems with new technologies rather than on user skills. In this way teachers can be more innovative and creative.

OUC Response

We agree with the EEC's remarks to the effect that increasing the permanent (as opposed to adjunct) faculty will contribute to the sustainability of the programme. However, it must be stated that hiring permanent faculty is a matter of university policy and largely depends on government funding, which has historically been very limited. All faculty positions (Lecturers, Assistant Professors, Associate Professors and Professors) need to be approved by the Ministries of Education and Finance. As a result, the University is highly dependent on Adjunct Tutors for teaching in the majority of student cohorts. As OUC is a member of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), this is also the case in other Open Universities as far as we know. The Programme, the relevant Faculty and the University overall evaluate adjunct faculty applications through a meticulous and fair point-system, which balances teaching experience, research standing, availability and motivation, as a result of which we are confident that Adjunct Faculty of the highest caliber are hired every year and have their contracts renewed, depending on their yearly evaluation results.

We also agree with the EEC's observation that "there is a need for continuous adaptation and revision of the training and support provided to teachers". While this is again a matter of university policy (since tutor training is provided centrally by the Laboratory for Educational Material and Methodology, or LEMM, and by the eClass support team), we intend closely to monitor the implementation of the newly designed interactive activities and to introduce appropriate corrections and modifications over the following years on the basis of our findings, with a view to increasing innovativeness and creativity. In doing so, we shall take into account the EEC's crucial recommendation that training and support for teachers should more clearly focus on the pedagogical possibilities and problems with new technologies rather than on user skills. In this respect, we shall seek to increase and diversify opportunities for more creative student-tutor interactions both in terms of assignments and in terms of content creation and educational activities.

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification (ESG 1.4)

Findings

Recruitment is healthy, especially in light of the Greek-language delivery which inevitably focuses recruitment on Greece and Cyprus.

The Internal Regulations set out clear processes for recognition of appropriate qualifications and experience, for student progression and certification.

We find no evidence to suggest that these regulations are not properly in force.

Strengths

It is clear that students find the programme well-suited to their professional and intellectual requirements, that pathways and progression are, in practice, clear and effective, contributing to strong achievement at assessment and high levels of satisfaction.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

While we find no cause for concern regarding any of these processes, and clear evidence that the programme meets all the necessary standards, clearer publication of relevant data would assist stakeholders, potential and present students in making well-informed judgements about the quality of the programme. In other words, the programme is absolutely sound, but more work could be done at an institutional level to make sure that it is easier to reach such a judgement based on publicly available data.

OUC Response

In response to the EEC's recommendation that we publish data concerning retention and dropout rates, etc., we are willing (as pointed out in Section 1 above) to work with the University's Student and Programmes of Study Support Unit in that direction. We agree that making such data publicly available will help present and potential students make informed decisions. We have already included a description of potential student career paths on our programme webpage (https://www.ouc.ac.cy/index.php/en/studies/programs/master/studies-degrees-master-tsp). We also hope to be able to publish data on our graduates' actual career development, as soon as such data are made available through our Alumni Office. It should be borne in mind that this is a matter of university policy rather than a decision for individual programmes to make.

5. Learning resources and student support (ESG 1.6)

Findings

There are weekly interactive activities, course materials take advantage of the range of technological and media possibilities available, as appropriate to the discipline of Theatre Studies, including design projects and simulations.

Students are able to transfer their learning into real-life professional situations with tangible outcomes and benefits for their learning and professional development.

Learning resources are well-designed with student-centered learned by mature autonomous students in mind.

The programme benefits from up-to-date technical infrastructure.

The LEMM unit provides appropriate and dedicated support to all aspects of the programme's pedagogical delivery.

Human resources - teaching, technical, administrative - contribute positively to the student experience.

The e-library resources are sufficient for researchers, teachers and students.

There is a variation of materials and activities taking advantage of the pedagogical possibilities of new technologies.

There are many examples of staff adopting new technologies in teaching.

Strengths

It is clear that the level of support offered by teaching staff to the academic development of students is outstanding.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Without the benefit of a site visit there are limits to the panel's capacity to assess areas of improvement. All the evidence obtained from the documentation, the viewing of presentations and examples, and the conversations with staff and students suggests that appropriate student support processes and resources are in place.

OUC Response

We appreciate and are grateful for the EEC's statement that the Programme offers a wide range of learning resources and adequate student support.



6. Additional for doctoral programmes (ALL ESG)

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7. Eligibility (Joint programme) (ALL ESG)

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B. Conclusions and final remarks

The panel wishes to congratulate the programme team and their colleagues in administration and LEMM on an excellent programme of study.

The main area in which we suggest that some immediate attention should be paid to improvements is not in the quality of the programme per se, but rather in the public communication of data that will enable external parties better to make the kind of positive judgements we have been able to make. This could involve the preparation of a simple key data section on the programme website.

Our other recommendations are designed to assist the programme team and the leadership of OUC in the development of a successful programme, assuring its continued relevance, updating its use of distance learning pedagogies and continuing to work on the realignment of its curriculum in keeping the programme's aspirations to the development of critical scholarship and practice, especially in the discipline-specific **articulation of feminist and post-colonial approaches.**

We have every confidence in the programme team's capacity to accomplish this ongoing development.

OUC Response

We are grateful for the EEC's recommendation that we foster "critical scholarship and practice, especially in the discipline-specific articulation of feminist and post-colonial approaches". This is a matter we take very seriously indeed. We have already included feminist, post-colonial, Marxist / post-Marxist and reception criticism in our "Theory of the Theatre" module. We are committed to making an even greater effort in that direction, so that artistic voices outside the dramatic and performative canon are represented in our programme's content. Specifically, we plan to make our perspective a more inclusive one in the following ways:

- (i) We shall include non-mainstream perspectives by means of assignment topics that bring feminist, post-colonial, deconstructive and/or materialist agendas to the fore either on a theoretical or on a practice-based/creative level.
- (ii) We shall encourage students to take on research topics that investigate non-normative trends in critical theory in their dissertations.
- (iii) We will extend invitations to specialists in relevant fields to offer guest seminars that explore these and similar approaches.

Last but very far from least, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the External Evaluation Committee (EEC), both for their constructive comments during our online meeting and for the detailed written feedback and recommendations in their evaluation report.

We do appreciate that the Committee characterizes the MA in "Theatre Studies" as "an excellent programme of study", and we will take into consideration all their suggestions, including the recommendation to make available all information that could be of further assistance to prospective and current students.

In closing, the Open University of Cyprus and the Academic Team would like to thank the external evaluation committee (EEC) for their very positive assessment of our postgraduate programme. The EEC's remarks, suggestions, and recommendations were very constructive, thoughtful, and extremely supportive of our efforts to restructure the Programme in the best possible way. We are looking forward to a positive decision by the CYQAA regarding the accreditation of the MA in "Theatre Studies" programme, as per the recommendations of the EEC.



C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Antonis Petrides	Associate Professor, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	
Avra Sidiropoulou	Associate Professor, Academic Coordinator, MA in Theatre Studies	
Vayos Liapis	Professor, MA in Theatre Studies	
Yannis Manolopoulos	Vice-Rector, Head of the University's Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Erato Ioanna Sarri	Quality Assurance Coordinator	

Date: 05/07/2021





