Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 04 March 2022

Higher Education Institution's Response

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

- **Town: Nicosia, Cyprus**

- **Programme of study In Greek:**
  Θεολογία (1,5 έτη / 90 ECTS, Μάστερ, Εξ Αποστάσεως)

  In English:

  Theology (1,5 years / 90 ECTS, Master of Arts, E-Learning)

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

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

- **Concentrations (if any):**

  In Greek: Concentrations
  In English: Concentrations

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 300.1.1/2 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.*

Introduction

We would like to thank the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) for their professional and thorough work during the online evaluation of the Department of Theology and two of its programmes on Wednesday, 1 December 2021. We would also like to express our appreciation for the collegial and constructive approach with which they conducted their evaluation. During the visit, the EEC met the faculty supporting the MA in Theology programmes and had separate meetings with current students and alumni.

More specifically, the EEC states:

- The programme under evaluation is a recently developed scholarly institution, small in size, but with high ambitions. It grows in a very competitive scientific environment. the University of Nicosia, and has already a good number of students and alumni. The technical equipment and the environment of the university are excellent, and the EEC has observed the friendly atmosphere at the Department. *There is strong evidence of the high quality of teaching and learning good practices, and excellent student experience.*
- The course offering includes courses with practical and pastoral approaches such as the course on Pedagogy and Education or the course on Pastoral Theology and Ethics.
- The number of the teaching staff is excellent compared to the number of students.
- The equipment of the University is perfect and its library also has theological literature. The teaching staff and the students have not complained about problems in the physical resources.

We do appreciate the Committee's positive comments and its recommendations for further improvements, which will enhance the quality of our Department and of its programmes; we will be addressing those in the corresponding sections of this response.

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

In this section the EEC outlines its findings and recommendations with reference to the programme, its design and development. The EEC underscores that the School has a clear system for internal quality assurance but raises questions about the involvement of students in the process. These questions are properly addressed.

Finding 1.1

The university and the School of Humanities has a clear system for internal quality assurance. However, we are not fully aware of how it works at the Department. During the visit, the EEC could not verify that the students have a formal way of giving feedback to the teachers or knowing whether the teachers react to their feedback. Formally the quality assurance follows proper standards, but in practice, it is not implemented in the Department.

The Department applies the same system of internal quality assurance as the rest of the School and the University. There are University, School, and Department quality assurance committees and students are full members. Students also participate in all the established decision making bodies of the University, including the Department. (See Annex 4: Quality Assurance and the IPEP Process).

Students provide feedback to their teachers both formally and informally. The Department has fostered an environment of open and continues interaction between students and staff (as Findings 4.2 confirm) which encourages students to raise in an informal manner any issues of concern with their teachers, the Programme Coordinator and/or the Head of Department, including issues pertaining to course content, teaching quality, academic and administrative support, workload etc.

In addition, there is a formal system through which students can provide feedback, in three ways:

a) Through the course evaluation process. The evaluation forms are collected by the Course Administrator and compiled in individual reports per course and lecturer They are forwarded to the individual faculty, the Head of Department and the Dean. Where the teaching performance of a teacher falls short of the requisite standards, remedial action is undertaken by the Head of Department.

b) Through participation in all University Bodies including the Department Council, the School Council and the Senate. Two student representatives are elected in the Department Council, take part in meetings and express student concerns on any aspect of the programme. These meetings are minuted and kept in Departmental archives. Where action with regard to points raised by the students is required, the action taken is reported in subsequent meetings with the student representatives in attendance.

c) Through the course tutorial meeting. Every student has a scheduled meeting with the course instructor during the term the course is taught. Although the primary aspect of such a meeting is to discuss student performance, students are encouraged to raise any concerns they might have about their programme and studies.

Finding 1.2

Most importantly, the students are not at all involved in the quality assurance program, and the department does not collect their complaints or disagreements.

The Department follows rigorously the University and School quality assurance regulations and students are involved at the stages of the process and in the ways these regulations envisage. Chapter 3 of the Internal Regulations that describe the quality assurance policies and the IPEP process for evaluating programmes to be submitted is included in the application for the accreditation of the programme. Moreover, there is a student representative in the Departmental Quality Assurance Committee.

Finding 1.3

The Department has a mission statement, but it is not easily accessible. It is not clearly indicated how the strategy is developed and monitored. Especially, the role of students is unclear and minimized. Greater transparency and student participation are needed.

The Department's mission statement can be found on the Departmental website as well as in the Programme Handbook (Annex 1) which is distributed to all students on admission to the course and is accessible to all members of staff and to the rest of the University.

Strategy in the Department is developed through a fruitful dialogue among the academics and our student and alumni constituencies in full congruence with the University and School's strategic vision.

Students have a core role in the Department as they formally and informally participate and contribute to Departmental life and decision making. They are fully informed of any decision made in the Department, and all the processes are fully transparent.

Finding 1.4

The department of theology needs a better inclusion within the School of Humanities. Its practices are not completely coherent with the rest of the School.

The Department fully participates in the activities of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The Head of the Department attends the scheduled meetings of the School management team, whereas other members of staff participate in University and School committees. The School is involved in the Departmental recruitment process, whereas the Department organises with the rest of the School joint seminars, conferences and promotion events.

Finding 1.5

The EEC did not have access to the printed material. The department has a web page for news, but it mostly deals with graduations, and it is not updated. The alumni activities are university-wide only.

All the material required for the application was delivered to CYQAA in three forms: (a) printed copies in Greek and English, (b) in digital form on a CD, and (c) uploaded on the Google drive setup and managed by the Agency.

All the information pertaining to the Department and its postgraduate programmes is contained in the compressive Programme Handbook (Annex 1) which is distributed to all students on admission to the course and is accessible to all members of staff and to the rest of the university. For ease of access, it is also uploaded on the Departmental and university website.

The web page is managed centrally by the University web team and the Department shall strive to ensure that its content is more comprehensive and updated at regular intervals. Alumni play an active role in the life of the Department, participating in seminars and other activities, including student recruitment. The Department will work with the University web team to ensure that these activities are reflected on its web page.

Finding 1.6

The EEC has doubts about the academic freedom of the Department due to its close economic and spiritual connections with some local religious institutions. For example, the only research publication presented to us as an academic achievement contains lots of images of church leaders unknown of their academic contributions.

We would like to thank the EEC for raising this issue because we would like to clarify this misunderstanding. Like the rest of the University, the Department cherishes and upholds academic freedom. Examples of academic freedom espoused by the Department constitute the collegiate way the Department is run, the wide variety of opinions expressed in local media by members of staff on social as well as religious issues, and the unrestricted choice of research areas by students and staff.

The Department clearly stated during the meeting with the EEC that there is no economic dependence or any kind of economic connection with any local religious institution in a way that compromises the Department's freedom of speech. The monastery of Kykkos offers accommodation to the Department as part of its noble and long tradition of funding education in Cyprus. The monastery is a benefactor with no involvement in any aspect of Departmental life be it academic, financial or related to staff and student activities. On the contrary, our current location allows our students and staff unfettered access to the

unique library and research material of the monastery. The EEC offered no evidence to support its assertion that such a relationship might exist.

The Department, as it should, has strong spiritual connections with many religious institutions both local and international. These ties are both a strategic aim of the Department and also a reflection of the high esteem in which the academics of the Department are held by both local and overseas churches and religious institutions. However, such relationships do not influence the independence and academic freedom of the Department.

What we presented during the online meeting was an example of how we disseminate our research to our wider constituency, the people who want to follow current research and scientific trends in our discipline, but in a way that is accessible and comprehensible. The output of scholastic research should not be restricted to the small group of experts, and indeed many learned societies in the world publish accessible journals to that end.

The journal we presented to the EEC, titled "Enateniseis", showcases ecclesiastical events but also makes current areas of theological research accessible to the wider public. It is a serious forum for theological debates and enjoys high reputation in the orthodox world. Annex 3: Three Issues of Enateniseis / Ενατενίσεις includes the table of contents of the three most recent editions. The full content is also submitted in separate volumes.

The research output of the faculty members is described in detail in the application and in their CVs attached here as Annex 5: Curricula Vitae. The publications include ISBN numbers.

Areas of Improvement and Recommendations

The students ought to be involved in the quality assurance program, and their feedback, complaints and disagreements should be systematically collected.

The Department follows rigorously the University and School quality assurance regulations and its students are involved at the stages of the process and in the ways these regulations envisage. Chapter 3 of the Internal Regulations, which describe the quality assurance policies and the IPEP process for evaluating programmes to be submitted, is included in the application for the accreditation of the programme as well as in this response as Annex 4: Quality Assurance and the IPEP Process. In addition to university-wide practices, the Department collects complaints and disagreements through the formal and informal ways described above. Finally, there is a student representative in the Departmental Quality Assurance Committee.

The Programme Handbook (Annex 1) contains details of these University and Departmental provisions.

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The students ought to be better involved in the development of the content of their studies.

The students are fully integrated in the development of the content of their studies.

a) Through their representatives they participate in all University Bodies including the Department Council, the School Council and the Senate. Two student representatives are elected in the Department Council and take part in Departmental meetings and can raise student concerns on any aspect of the programme. These meetings are minuted and kept in Departmental archives. Where action with regard to points raised by the students is required, the action taken is reported in subsequent meetings with the student representatives in attendance.

b) Through the course tutorial meeting. Every student has a scheduled meeting with the course instructor during the term the course is taught. Although the primary aspect of such a meeting is to discuss student performance in the course, students are encouraged to raise any issues that might concern them affecting their overall academic performance.

c) There is a student representative in the Departmental Quality Assurance Committee that oversees quality for existing programmes and new programmes to be introduced.

The workload of the different ECTS units should be systematically monitored and changed, if necessary.

We would like to thank the EEC for this point which is so true for all of us. The workload is constantly monitored and amended to reflect the reality on the ground. There is an annual Course Review meeting at the end of the academic year where all aspects of the course are reviewed. The Annual Review assess student admission, student progress and graduation, student experience, satisfaction and any input they may have made and decides whether any amendments to the Course should be made.

The academic output of the Department remains unknown, as little evidence of the peer-reviewed international scholarly publications of the staff was accessible.

The academic staff of the Department has published more than 100 monographs and their research has been recognised by prestigious bodies such as the National Academy of Athens, that awarded a prize to Professor Christos Economou for his work on St Neophytos in 2009.

The Greek speaking community of academic theologians favours peer-reviewed monographs to peer-reviewed short papers that are typically published in international journals. This academic tradition has been established for hundreds of years, has produced great literary works, and goes back to the Great Fathers of the Church.

The research output of the faculty is described in detail in the application and the CVs of the faculty members attached here as Annex 5: Curricula Vitae. The publications include ISBN numbers.

The Department's web page should be updated and give more information about the Department's principles, practices, activities, and research.

We recognise the scope for more regular updates of our website; this will make our principles, practices, activities, and research more visible. We shall liaise with the University web team to work on this issue.

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

In this section the EEC outlines its findings and recommendations with reference to 2. Student–centred learning, teaching and assessment. The EEC underscores that close relationship between teachers and students but once again raises questions about the involvement of students in the process, the structure and delivery of courses. These questions are properly addressed.

Findings for 2.1

There is a permanent informal interaction between teachers and students. Students trust without any critical attitude in the knowledge and experience of their educators.

With all due respect to the esteemed members of the EEC, yes, there is an ongoing interaction among faculty and students but it is simply not a fair statement for our students to write that they lack a critical attitude! Amongst our students we have some eminent personalities from Greece and Cyprus, such as bishops, members of parliament, high ranking army and police officers, lawyers, doctors etc. These high ranking members of the Church, the State and Society are quite accomplished, intelligent and competent professionals.

What is fair to say is that students show respect and trust to the teaching staff on account of their experience and scholarship and because this is part of our culture.

What is true for the students on the course is the ability to think critically and to express their views in the context of their didactic experience. Our students are, on the main, mature people, with ample work experience and personal attributes, who see the course as a joint venture between the Department and themselves and want to fully and actively participate in the learning process and the development of a unique and rich educational experience.

The Department, as the EEC recognises, has established a fruitful interaction between students and staff, which encourages and facilitates students to frankly express their views on the course and any other aspect of their educational experience. Our students energetically and robustly participate in class and other activities and do not desist from challenging their teachers.

Most of the courses are compulsory and there is no clear policy for the offering of the elective ones, particularly in Annex 1 on page 37.

The compulsory nature of the courses is a perfect example of how student feedback has been heeded. Originally, there were elective courses in the programme, but they were abolished when the programme was revised as a result of feedback received from the students. Students wanted to get exposure to all relevant disciplines and this is an example of how student feedback is acted upon.

Findings for 2.2

The course offering includes courses with practical and pastoral approaches such as the course on Pedagogy and Education or the course on Pastoral Theology and Ethics.

This is consistent with the programme's philosophy to offer both knowledge and practical skills to its students.

Findings for 2.3

The assessment policy in every course syllabus is quite simple and stereotyped. There is no detailed information about the evaluation process for skills such as, style, analysis, critical thinking, and knowledge.

The assessment policy is the one applied in the university as a whole. It is standardised rather than stereotyped. Such a standardisation makes it easier for students to prepare for the assessment, makes it clear to the students that all course assessments are comparable in terms of difficulty and importance, and makes it easier to compare performance and attainment. We recognise that possible disadvantages may exist is such an assessment system but the Department has opted for the current system as the most appropriate for the programmes of study it offers.

There is full congruence between learning outcomes and assessment in every course of the programme. Learning outcomes are formally assessed in every course and details of how this is achieved is contained in the Programme Handbook. Each of the three assessment methods, examinations, coursework and dissertation, assess skills such as critical thinking, knowledge of the subject matter, and research skills.

Critical thinking is developed in the course by encouraging students to learn a subject through the construction of their own understanding of knowledge rather than acquiring uncritically the meaning from their instructor. We therefore expect students in their coursework or written examination and to a greater degree in the dissertation to present a highly individual answer supported by cogent arguments. Analytical ability is also tested through appropriate tasks that students have to perform in coursework, written examination and the dissertation. In all three types of assessment, we evaluate the thought processes students go through to arrive at a given conclusion and their discussion of its implications. In terms of style, in some courses, the appropriate style is discursive, in some others it is analytical and in some, more attention is paid to reflective style of writing. In all cases, we expect students to have a high degree of linguistic competence, and assistance is provided to students to fall short of the expected level.

No metrics between the LO and the evaluation stages is developed in the provided material.

The evaluation is connected with the Learning Outcomes and the evaluation method consists of final exams, written work, and the Thesis. Each course is assessed by examinations and coursework, which is specially designed to develop the particular knowledge and skills relevant to each field of study.

Areas of Improvement and Recommendations

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 2.1

The EEC sees a need for a better involvement of students in the process of programme and course design and improvement.

As outlined above the students have an active formal role in the work of the University, School and Department. Students influence the design of courses through their formal and informal feedback, and participation in the Departmental and course management committees.

The Department strives to provide as many opportunities as possible to students to express their views on how to improve the programme. In particular:

a)   Through their representatives they participate in all University Bodies including the Department Council, the School Council and the Senate. Two student representatives are elected in the Department Council and take part in Departmental meetings and can raise student concerns on any aspect of the programme. These meetings are minuted and kept in departmental archives. Where action with regard to points raised by the students is required, the action taken is reported in subsequent meetings with the student representatives in attendance.

b)   Through the course tutorial meeting. Every student has a scheduled meeting with the course instructor during the term the course is taught. Although the primary aspect of such a meeting is the to discuss student performance on the course, students are encouraged to raise any issues that might affect their performance.

c) There is a student representative in the Departmental Quality Assurance Committee that oversees quality for existing programmes and new programmes to be introduced.

The use of Video Conferences with students, particularly because most of them are in similar time zones, would be more effective for interaction and improvement of the learning process.

Indeed, we agree with the EEC. The Moodle platform provides access to Cisco Webex for live, online meetings.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 2.2

The Programme Learning Outcomes can express in a more detailed way the practical and applied aspects of the programme.

We thank the EEC for this comment and in response we have initiated a process to review the Programme Learning Outcomes. We believe that the Programme Handbook (Annex 1) adequately presents the practical and applied aspects of the programme, but we shall expand the information provided.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 2.3

The EEC recommends the utilization of different assessment methods. Accomplished theses should be available digitally in the library catalogue.

We have debated robustly both internally, within the School and with DIPAE during the approval of the course whether the current system of assessment is suitable for the programme, and we reached the conclusion that it is. The EEC does not offer any justification for its recommendations Any new assessment methods must fulfil the legal requirements of the pertinent bodies in both Cyprus and Greece the two countries where our students come from. Typically, a course is assessed through:

Final Exam 60%

Continues assessment, written work, assignments 30%

Active participation 10%

All the theses are stored in the Department's library and are available to students; we now are in the process of making them available electronically.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 2.4.

The EEC recommends the implementation of interactive activities that facilitate the distance learning process.

We thank the EEC for its wise recommendation which is part of our E-Learning Programme.

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3. Teaching staff
(ESG 1.5)

In this section the EEC outlines its findings and recommendations with reference to the teaching staff. The EEC would like to see a more transparent process of recruitment and more young and female members of faculty. The response outlines the process of hiring and explains that recently two new, young faculty members, one of them female, have been recruited.

Findings

Findings for 3.1

The process of recruitment has not been transparent, as so many of the teachers have been recruited by invitation only. No clear peer review process has been utilized. A great number of the teaching personnel are retired teachers, whose ability to apply modern pedagogical methods is - based on the material provided to the EEC - limited. There is no evidence that the teaching is based on current research. The teachers receive no feedback from their teaching performance.

The University of Nicosia established the Department seven years ago with the explicit aim to become a centre of excellence. Launching a postgraduate master's programme and a doctoral programme were the visible manifestations of this ambition and hiring distinguished academics from bigger and more established Schools of Theology, able to teach on the master's programme and supervise doctoral students, was the means of realising our aims.

This is a vision and strategy shared by the accreditation bodies of the Republic of Cyprus, the wider academic theological community and the students who have attended the programmes of the Department. We count amongst our faculty three former Deans of the School of Theology at the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki and two Deans of the School of Theology at the National University of Athens.

It is not unusual for academics of indisputable eminence to be invited to apply for professorial positions. All invited academics have gone through the entire formal appointment process of the University of Nicosia, including consent by the Senate and the Council of the University. It is therefore inaccurate for the EEC to state that no peer-review process has been utilised and that the recruitment process is not transparent.

The EEC states that a great number of teaching personnel is retired teachers from other universities. The University of Nicosia does not have an arbitrary cut off age beyond which academics are deemed useless. The University believes that individuals should be judged not for their age but for their skills and

knowledge. This policy is in line with what happens in educationally advanced countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where retirement on account of age has been abolished.

The University policy is based both on equality grounds and on ample evidence that age is not an impediment to using modern pedagogy or to scholarship in general. If there is no retirement age in the US for instance, the EEC does not explain why this should not be the case in Cyprus, a country which, after all, has a higher life expectancy than the US.

The EEC claims, based on the material handed to them, that our "retired" academics have limited ability to apply modern pedagogical methods. We are not sure which material has the EEC used to reach such a conclusion, but whatever that material might be, this is not the case in the Department. Our "retired" academics embraced online teaching effortlessly and enthusiastically and have not been deterred in using learning technology. The use of Moodle for example is a standard practice

The vast majority of teaching on the programme is based on research and in nearly all courses the main bibliographical sources are peer-reviewed research monographs written in most cases by the instructors themselves.

We would like to stress that of the current 21 members of staff, only eight are retired academics from other universities. At the same time, we recognize the need to hire more female and young academics to ensure the sustainability of the Department and the programmes offered.

Both formal and informal feedback on teaching is provided by the students in the ways described in our response to Findings 1.1. Action is taken where required and the results of those actions are communicated to students. The Head of Department also assess teaching performance of each member of staff at the annual evaluation meeting.

Findings for 3.2.

The number of the teaching staff is excellent compared to the number of students. However, it remained unclear how many of the permanent staff actually live in Cyprus.

It is our strategy to keep a low student to staff ratio in order to provide excellent academic and pastoral experience to our students and to foster a collaborative learning environment. As most of our students are mature, we have managed to retain a close relationship with our students outside the classroom with their involvement in both marketing and scientific initiatives of the Department. The vast majority of teaching staff live permanently in Cyprus and are available to students. All teaching staff have office and advising hours where the students can visit them. Also, advice can be realized through telephone, online or by email. Of course, we actively invite esteemed colleagues to teach on our programmes as visiting faculty.

Findings for 3.3

The academic level of the teaching personnel's recent publications remains unclear, as they are hard to find in international academic publications. Typically, the ISBN-numbers of their publications cannot be found at all, or the monographs are published by non-academic publishers. Based on the evidence provided, the teaching is not based on academic research.

The Department's academics are engaged in serious, original and prestigious research in the Greek Orthodox academic and patristic tradition established and shaped by the Great Fathers of the Church. The main research output in this scholastic tradition is the monograph, which takes years to be completed and which is peer-reviewed before publication. Teaching staff regularly publish peer-reviewed monographs and more that 100 monographs have already been published.

With respect to the EEC, we would like to state that international academic publications is not the only metric of research quality. We are surprised that the EEC could not find the ISBN numbers of the publication included in the staff CVs. Monographs, irrespective of the publisher, are still peer reviewed and the distinction between academic and non-academic publisher is not relevant.

Our teaching is informed by research both ours and other leading theologians. All this is presented in the Programme Handbook, where from the bibliography becomes clear that teaching is primarily informed by research.

Areas of Improvement and Recommendations For

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 3.1

The Department ought to recruit younger scholars based on their academic and pedagogical skills. A transparent process should be used in the process. Moreover, more female teachers and research personnel ought to be recruited.

This point has been addressed in Findings 3.1 above. The Department was set up with established academics experienced in teaching and research as the quickest and safest way of becoming a centre of excellence. We have now started to recruit younger academics, and two new members have joined the Department recently, one of them female. The University appointment process was followed.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 3.2

The Department must ensure that the teachers are actually available for the students in Cyprus.

The vast majority of our teaching faculty members live permanently in Cyprus and are available to students. They all have office and advising hours, where students can visit them. Also, advice can be realized through telephone, online or via email.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 3.3

The quantity and the academic quality of the research done in the Department and by the teachers ought to be systematically monitored and peer-reviewed. It must also be ensured that the teaching is actually based on research. The students ought to be systematically involved in giving feedback from the teaching.

There is a normal Departmental process through which the Head of Department evaluates the quantity and quality of research output of every permanent member of staff. Our teaching is informed by research, both ours and other leading theologians.

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

In this section the EEC outlines its findings and recommendations with reference to Student admission, progression, recognition and certification. The EEC recommends the application of more differentiated rules regarding admission and the response outlines the multidisciplinary process followed.

Findings for 4.1

Regulations regarding admission are clearly described on the homepage of the University of Nicosia. The EEC has not detected any intransparency in the enrollment of students.

No Comment

Findings for 4.2

The University of Nicosia has a promising plan for monitoring student progression, yet the EEC was not able to prove if this is applied in the programme under evaluation. However, the interviewed students confirmed that they had direct access to their instructors and could discuss their progress.

We follow the university plan for monitoring student progression. As the EEC found, students have direct access to their tutors to discuss their progress. More formal mechanisms include the feedback meeting between a student and an instructor after a coursework has been submitted and marked. There is also the six-monthly meeting between teachers and students to discuss the latter's overall performance.

Findings for 4.3

The application refers to the student recognition standards of the University of Nicosia. The EEC has interviewed an alumnus whose prior postgraduate studies had been partially recognized.

Students with a relevant postgraduate qualification may be exempted from certain courses of the programme up to a maximum of 30 ECTS. Details are provided in the Programme Handbook (Annex 1) pages 21-26.

Findings for 4.4

No special information regarding certification has been provided.

This is a university-wide policy clearly stated in the Programme Handbook (Annex 1) (page 33). Every degree certificate is accompanied by a diploma supplement, that includes information on the course of study and academic degree a student attained, such as the entrance criteria, goals and contents of the

course of study. and a transcript that contains the subjects studied by the student, the grades achieved and any other achievements during the course of study in line with the University of Nicosia regulations.

Areas of Improvement and Recommendations

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 4.1

The EEC recommends the application of more differentiated rules regarding admission. Specialization in theology presupposes a Bachelor in a relevant discipline. The admission regulations should include bridging courses for students depending on their academic backgrounds. Students holding e.g. a Bachelor of Science degree need more preparatory modules, 40-60 ECTS points.

Students whose first degree is not in theology are introduced to fundamental aspects of theology before registration through the provision of relevant literature and seminars. After registration they receive additional tuition support. However, instead of introducing bridging courses that would have bloated the programme, we adopted a graduated approach within each module. This results in slightly higher workload per module as the EEC comments in Findings 5.4, which the students find pedagogically tolerable and has worked well so far. It is not practical to increase the workload by an additional 60 ECTS.

Similarly, it must be formally ensured that international students who are not native speakers have excellent knowledge of modern Greek. Otherwise, they cannot be enrolled on a Master programme taught entirely in Greek.

We require that students know Greek when they join the Course.

Students intending to write a thesis in Biblical or Patristic studies must have knowledge of at least one relevant ancient language (ancient Greek, Latin or Hebrew), and the programme shall offer additional courses for these ancient languages.

We require that students who write a thesis in biblical or patristic studies have knowledge of Classical Greek / Koine. We also provide remedial courses in Classical Greek / Koine.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 4.2

Instructors may prove the progress of students by applying more differentiated criteria according to the Bloom taxonomy.

We follow the University policy on this matter and this will form part of the review of the programme following the EEC feedback.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 4.3

The publication of the recognition criteria on the homepage of the department is strongly recommended.

The criteria are currently included in the Programme Handbook. We shall give greater prominence of the criteria on the Departmental web page.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 4.4

The EEC has indicated that the Programme is not compliant in this respect but there is no additional feedback.

Learning resources and student support

(ESG 1.6)

In this section the EEC outlines its findings and recommendations with reference to Learning Resources and Student Support. The EEC is not convinced that the students have access to source material and bibliography that is essential for scientific research. These concerns are fully addressed in the response. Students have full access to a wealth of materials both in physical and digital form.

Findings for 5.1

The University of Nicosia provides the Master programme with the appropriate facilities. However, the EEC could not prove if students have access to source material and bibliography that is essential for scientific research. In the recorded lecture, no media is applied. Similarly, handouts are not distributed, and the form of the lesson is dated.

The students have full access to whatever material is required for scientific research through the University of Nicosia library. All academic libraries are interconnected and faculty and students can borrow books, journals and have access to online databases. The University library provides online access through the web to all major online databases.

Distributing material is standard practice in all courses. We provide notes and additional bibliography and sources in every lecture beyond that included in the Programme Handbook. Also, all the material is available on Moodle.

We disagree that the form of the lesson is dated. On the contrary, we encourage full student participation in the learning process and the lectures are lively and interactive. This is helped by the fact that the academics who teach on the courses always bring new angles and recent developments in the courses they teach.

Findings for 5.2

The equipment of the University is perfect, and its library also has theological literature. The teaching staff and the students have not complained about problems in the physical resources. However, there is no evidence of a rich digital library with enough databases for the DL students to consult and use for an updated research production.

The students have full access to whatever material is required for scientific research through the University of Nicosia Library. All academic libraries are interconnected and faculty and students can borrow books, journals and have access to online databases. The University library provides online access through the web to all major online databases.

Findings for 5.3

The administration staff is numerous. However, there are no tutors specialized for this programme of studies.

The students have full administrative and academic support. Tutorial support is provided by the professors as well as by specialized academic advisory staff, strengthening the relationship between the teaching faculty and the students.

Findings for 5.4

The workload of the Master students as presented to the EEC is heavy and does not comply with the standard workload of the ECTS points. However, there is also a flexibility for individual students who are able to follow only a part-time programme of study.

The workload is heavy because every course of the programme contains its own bridging material, something that the EEC has recommended! The Department however monitors student performance on a continuous basis and provides a flexible learning pathway to students who require it.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 5.1

The University should provide teaching staff and students with access to more specialized international scientific journals and a properly equipped academic library.

The Department, through the University online Library material, is subscribing to a large number of international theology journals. All academic libraries in Cyprus are interconnected and students and faculty members have full access to all available material, both physical and digital.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for 5.4

The Master programme could be enriched by collaborations with renowned universities of Western Europe and America. This would support the mobility of the teaching staff and the Master students.

The Department is currently collaborating closely with the University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In addition, it has developed collaborations and has signed memoranda of cooperation with many University and Research Centers in various countries of the world.

At the same time, it utilizes internationally acknowledged scholars on issues of Theology as invited speakers at various events and educational activities organized by the Department.
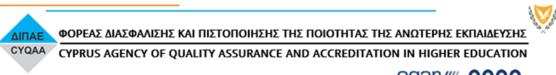The Department of Theology has also developed collaborations with the following:

- School of Theology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
- School of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
- Saints Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate and Doctoral Studies in Moscow Patriarchate, Russia
- International Academy of Theology and Philosophy "Saints Cyril and Methodius" in Holy Diocese of Lagkada, Thessaloniki, Greece
- Cultural Institution "Arxangelos" and Research Centre of Kykkos Monastery in Nicosia, Cyprus
- St. Petersburg Theological Seminary and Academy *in Saint Petersburg*, Russia
- SS. Cyril & Methodius Plovdiv Theological Academy in *Plovdiv, Bulgaria*
- Holy Diocese of Kifissia's in Athens, Greece
- Holy Diocese of Korinthos, Greece
- Holy Diocese of Limassol, Cyprus
- Holy Archdiocese of Crete, Greece
- Municipality of Heraklion Crete, Greece
- Youth Ministry Foundation of the Holy Cathedral of St. Titus of Heraklion Crete, Greece

5. **Additional for doctoral programmes**
   (ALL ESG)

N/A

7. Eligibility (Joint programme)
(ALL ESG)

N/A

B. Conclusions and final remarks

We would like to thank the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) for their professional and thorough work during the online evaluation of the Department of Theology and two of its programmes on Wednesday, 1 December 2021. We would also like to express our appreciation for the collegial and constructive approach with which they conducted their evaluation. During the visit, the EEC met the faculty supporting the MA in Theology programmes, and had separate meetings with our current students and alumni.

Conclusions

The programme under evaluation is a recently developed scholarly institution small in size but with high ambitions. It grows in a very competitive scientific environment the university of Nicosia and has already a good number of students and alumni. The technical equipment and the environment of the university are excellent, and the EEC has observed the friendly atmosphere at the department. The Department ha a direct relationship to the Metropolis of Kykkos that supports it in terms of finances and facilities.

We thank the EEC for recognizing the ambition of the Department to become a Centre of Excellence in Theological Studies and the friendly atmosphere it has fostered. We have explained to the EEC members that there is no financial support from the Metropolis of Kykkos other than the provision of office space to staff and access to its library and research centre to faculty and students.

However, the EEC has been astonished by the great number of retired professors which is not acceptable according to international academic standards. As a result, many administrative and teaching practises are or run the risk of being outdated. For example, the only journal that is mentioned in the application does not fulfil any scholarly quality standards such as peer review practises or the international impact factor. We did not have access to the printed research material. The department has a web page for news, but it mostly deals with graduations, and it is not updated.

We have provided a detailed explanation as to our recruitment strategy, which in the short-term was the only viable strategy for the launch of a postgraduate programme in Theology. In the meantime we started hiring younger faculty members including females. The Department follows a scholastic tradition, established over many centuries, of publishing peer-reviewed monographs, and this tradition has produced works of great academic distinction. New members of staff are encouraged, and indeed publish in international journals.

Final Recommendations

The evaluation committee recommends the practice of a transparent faculty recruitment policy that includes young and female scholars from diverse international backgrounds.

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The Department was set up by the University seven years ago with the explicit aim to become a centre of excellence. Launching a postgraduate master's programme and a doctoral programme were the visible manifestations of this ambition and hiring distinguished academics from bigger and more established Schools of Theology, able to teach on the master's programme and supervise doctoral students, was the means of realising our aims.

This is a vision and strategy shared by the accreditation bodies of the Republic of Cyprus, the wider academic theological community and the students who have attended the programmes of the Department. We count amongst our faculty three former Deans of the School of Theology at the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki and two Deans of the School of Theology at the National University of Athens.

It is not unusual for academics of indisputable eminence to be invited to apply for professorial positions. All invited academics have gone through the entire formal appointment process of the University of Nicosia, including consent by the Senate and the Council of the University. It is therefore inaccurate for the EEC to state that no peer-review process has been utilised and that the recruitment process is not transparent.

The EEC states that a great number of teaching personnel is retired teachers from other universities. The University of Nicosia does not have an arbitrary cut off age beyond which academics are deemed useless. The University believes that individuals should be judged not for their age but for their skills and knowledge. This policy is in line with what happens in educationally advanced countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where retirement on account of age has been abolished.

The University policy is based both on equality grounds and on ample evidence that age is not an impediment to using modern pedagogy or to scholarship in general. If there is no retirement age in the US for instance, the EEC does not explain why this should not be the case in Cyprus, a country which, after all, has a higher life expectancy than the US.

The vast majority of teaching on the programme is based on research and in nearly all courses, the main bibliographical sources are peer-reviewed research monographs written in most cases by the instructors themselves.

We would like to stress that of the current 21 members of staff only 8 are retired academics from other universities. At the same time, we recognize the need to hire more female and young academics to ensure the sustainability of the Department and the programmes offered.

Both formal and informal feedback on teaching is provided by the students in the ways described in our response to Findings 1.1. Action is taken where required and the results of those actions are communicated to students. The Head of Department also assess teaching performance of each member of staff at the annual evaluation meeting.

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The role of students ought to be enhanced on all levels. Their active participation in the quality assurance program, especially regarding their feedback, and the development of the study program must be secured.

Students participate in a formal way in many activities within the department pertaining to course design teaching evaluation admissions and assessments. Our entire pedagogic philosophy places our students in the centre of our activities and the programme is designed to help them complete the course in a timely way.

As outlined above the students have an active formal role in the work of the University, School and Department. Students influence the design of courses through their formal and informal feedback, and participation in the Departmental and course management committees.

The Department strives to provide as many opportunities as possible to students to express their views on how to improve the programme. In particular:

a)   Through their representatives they participate in all University Bodies including the Department Council, the School Council and the Senate. Two student representatives are elected in the Department Council and take part in Departmental meetings and can raise student concerns on any aspect of the programme. These meetings are minuted and kept in departmental archives. Where action with regard to points raised by the students is required, the action taken is reported in subsequent meetings with the student representatives in attendance.

b) Through the course tutorial meeting. Every student has a scheduled meeting with the course instructor during the term the course is taught. Although the primary aspect of such a meeting is the to discuss student performance on the course, students are encouraged to raise any concerns they might have about their studies.

c) There is a student representative in the Departmental Quality Assurance Committee that oversees quality for existing programmes and new programmes to be introduced.

The department ought to strive for a higher academic quality. The teaching staff should be encouraged to publish their articles in international peer reviewed journals in international languages.

As we address Greek speaking students and wider academic audience the academics of the Department write normally in Greek and concentrate in monographs. To reach the status of full professor in the Greek speaking schools of Theology one needs to write at least four peer-reviewed monographs, which must deal with original academic subjects. These monographs are then reviewed by internal and external

academic experts. However, academics do write in English or other languages when participating in international conferences.

The admission regulations should include bridging courses for students depending on their academic backgrounds.

We have explained how the admission process works and how we have introduced bridging material into the courses. Please note that our approach to admission is in line with the regulations of the University of Nicosia and the practice of universities in both Cyprus and Greece.

Philosophically, our approach is also in line with the increasing tendency of interdisciplinary research and theology, as an ethics-based discipline, is relevant to disciplines such as bioethics, ecology, law etc. The plurality of the backgrounds of our students confirms our policy.

The Department should have closer connections with the academic society. Whereas some local religious institutions offer important resources, their impact on the Department may compromise the academic standards and the freedom of research.

The Department of Theology has strong connections with the academic society and local and overseas churches and academic institutions, but is fully independent of any external influence, religious or otherwise.

In general, the Department ought to be better integrated into the University of Nicosia, which to a much higher degree complies with general, transparent academic standards.

The Department is fully integrated with the University of Nicosia and fully complies with all regulations of the University of Nicosia and upholds the standards of the University.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Prof. Klimis Mastoridis	Dean	
Prof. Christos Oikonomou	Head of Department Program Coordinator	
FullName	Position	
FullName	Position	
FullName	Position	
FullName	Position	

Date: 04/03/2022

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