

Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: 21.9.2020

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

- **Town:** Nicosia

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

In Greek:

Νομική (PhD, 3 Έτη, 180 ECTS)

In English:

Law (PhD, 3 Years, 180 ECTS)

- **Language(s) of instruction:** Greek, English
- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating

The present document has been prepared within the framework of the authority and competencies of the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, according to the provisions of the “Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education and the Establishment and Operation of an Agency on Related Matters Laws of 2015 to 2019” [N. 136 (I)/2015 to N. 35(I)/2019].

A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area.*
- *In particular, under each assessment area, the HEI must respond on, without changing the format of the report:*
 - *the findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
 - *the deficiencies noted under the quality indicators (criteria)*
 - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The HEI's response must follow below the EEC's comments, which must be copied from the external evaluation report (Doc. 300.1.1).*
- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development

(ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.8, 1.9)

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC found that the establishment of a high quality doctoral programme increases the international profile of the Law School and of the University of Nicosia. The contribution of such a programme to the Cypriot legal community and the wider society cannot be underestimated. Although the PhD programme is a relatively recent development, it has attracted circa 21 students from Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan and from other countries. The students interviewed by the EEC commented very positively about the programme and indicated that the level of supervision, the links between the University of Nicosia and other professional bodies in the countries, and the research profile of the teaching staff of the School of Law were reasons influencing their decision to enroll to the programme. The programme of study is well managed and there is a strong emphasis on identifying risks and opportunities for its future development and expansion. The EEC was impressed by the energy and commitment of the teaching personnel as well as their desire to provide students with excellent support, timely supervision and research materials. To this end, the departmental strategy of attracting and retaining high quality staff, the strong link between research and teaching, the active pursuit of interdisciplinary connections and international collaborations, and the collaboration with legal experts and external stakeholders are instrumental.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improving the programme. It has been suggested that the Department considers the issue of part-time PhD students and the risks that might be involved in admitting students from non-legal backgrounds. The recommendation is well noted. The Department already monitors both the acceptance and the progress of students coming from non-legal disciplines. In most cases before acceptance, we interview them. We then monitor their progress every 6 months through the completion of prescribed forms. If any problems are encountered the main supervisor reports them immediately to the DPPC that handles them accordingly. The Department will carefully monitor the situation taking into account the EEC recommendations and if problems arise, it will take action accordingly.

The EEC further suggested that the Department revisits the maximum length of 80.000 words for the PhD thesis with a view to adopting a more flexible upper limit. The recommendation is welcome. The issue has already been rectified. Indeed, the updated PhD Guide for the programme now explicitly provides that the word limit is indicative only and depends on the subject matter of the individual PhD thesis. Any decision on the length of the Thesis depends on the DPPC's decision that takes the circumstances of each case into account, thus offering the necessary flexibility.

The EEC has further noted that the involvement of junior staff in supervision would not pose any problems if there is a senior co-supervisor and a full Professor has the ultimate responsibility for the quality. We take the recommendation seriously into account. We note that the DIPAE guidelines have been adopted and a Professor/Associate Professor is included in the three member supervisory committee. The Department has adopted stricter criteria with regards to main supervisor than the DIPAE and university general guidelines by providing that only faculty who have at least the rank of Assistant Professor may act as main supervisors. The University further provides courses on supervision for more junior faculty.

2. Teaching, learning and student assessment

(ESG 1.3)

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC noted that the program supports students' individual and social development due to the following reasons. The students' individual development is ensured by the continuous guiding/help by their Supervisor and monitoring. Social development on the other hand is supported inter alia through the aim to educate students on how to disseminate research through presenting their work in academic conferences or seminars, the defence /presentation of the thesis, the possibility to undergo training of personal skills by the Supervisor. Additionally, the objective for an annual intake of up to 10-12 students and the university's internal limit for supervisors to oversee a maximum of 5 PhD students guarantees personal care on a high level and therefore involvement. Lastly, the students are granted support when facing difficulties/personal challenges by the centre for research and counseling services (KESY), where the students learn coping skills. The process of teaching and learning is flexible, considers different modes of delivery, and facilitates the achievement of planned learning outcomes. The structure and content catered to individual students is primarily shaped by each student's research interests and their interaction with their Supervisor. Furthermore, the constant monitoring ensures that the students achieve their learning outcomes and adhere to the given time frame as much as possible. The students have to take an active role both with regards to the content such as the design and the execution of an independent research project together with the thesis as well as with regards to their progress due to the time limit of eight years. The students in the program are encouraged to work independently but can refer to their Supervisor for any matters. The Supervisor must maintain regular and frequent contact with the students.

The EEC has further made recommendations for further improvement of the programme. It was noted that it is not clearly outlined how the mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship is promoted. Mutual respect between students and staff could be promoted by organizing informal gatherings at the beginning of the semester for the purpose of getting to know each other. The recommendation is positively received. The School/Department already organize informal gatherings at the beginning of the semester, including presentations of the research progress amongst PhD students and faculty, but will aim to formalize such gatherings even further.

The EEC has further suggested that there is provision of more office space for those students who need it as well as a dedicated budget for conference attendance and other research activities. The recommendation is positively received. The issue of office space and budget needs to be addressed centrally by the University and approved by the Council. For the time being such requests are dealt with on an individual basis and are subject to a student's application requesting space and/or the coverage of costs for research purposes. The Department will refer the issue for consideration to the Council, requesting that additional office space is granted once the covid situation ends.

3. Teaching Staff (ESG 1.5)

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the teaching staff consists of highly qualified and internationally educated employees, who are capable to ensure quality and sustainability of teaching and learning. The teaching staff is regularly engaged in professional and teaching-skill training and development. The Department is further subject to quality assurance internal committees. It has been confirmed that the specializations and qualifications of faculty adequately support the delivery of the LLM, and that members of staff are research active, that the balance between teaching, research and administration appears reasonable, and that the staff is highly motivated and enthusiastic.

The EEC has also made suggestions for further improvement. It has been recommended that in case of an increase in student population, the number of full-time professors and teaching staff should be increased.

We fully agree with the suggestion as it forms part of our departmental strategy. Full-time teaching staff is employed as needs arise. We always opt for teaching staff that is relevant to both the teaching and research needs of the University.

4. Students

(ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the regulations regarding student admission are pre-defined and published online, and that the access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. The EEC has also noted that students' progress is continuously assessed throughout the semester, utilizing various methods and techniques. Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student admission are in place (<https://www.unic.ac.cy/admission-requirements/>; PhD Application, B.5., p. 12 f.; PhD Application, Annex 2A, p. 47 f.) Admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. The possibility of interviewing prospective students was raised during the online visit. The Law School has predefined and published regulations regarding student progression.

The EEC has also made recommendations and remarks for further improvement. The EEC has mentioned that the School admits graduates from non-legal but related disciplines. As also indicated above, this involves a certain level of risk regarding the legal quality of the scientific output and the EEC would suggest the close monitoring of such risks. We have addressed this recommendation above.

5. Resources

(ESG 1.6)

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the teaching and learning resources are adequate and that the physical resources are fit for purpose and are ensured for changing circumstances. The students of the Programme have access to various resources and student's services as library, information center, computing facilities etc. The lecturers in general use in their courses research material and other resources, linking research activity to teaching. The University is committed to educational excellence that encompasses inclusive access to higher education and that fosters teaching and learning. It has further been noted that the monitoring of student progress can be seen as a best practice, and that learning resources are of good standard. Also, that student support is adequate to support the transfer programme.

The EEC has further recommended that an adequate level of support for mature students of the Programme needs to be ensured.

The recommendation is welcome. We note that the University currently offers full support to all students, including mature ones. However, we will oversee how to further improve our efforts in this respect as well.

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

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

The PhD has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has identified a number of strengths: A clearly set out process of admission, management, progression and examination of doctoral students, a rigorous system of examining PhD students, research proposals and thesis which avoids conflicts of interest and ensures academic integrity, a compulsory research methodology course which is regularly updated, and a small cohort of PhD students which ensures regular contact with the supervisory team and the provision of timely feedback.

Yet, it also identified areas of improvement and made some recommendations as follows: The provision of adequate office space for those students who need it and a dedicated budget to support conference attendance and other research activities, a reconsideration of the maximum word limit (80.000) of the thesis, ensuring that a Full Professor is always a member of the Supervisory Team if the main supervisor is an Assistant Professor or an Associate Professor, considering whether all PhD applicants should be interviewed before their admission to the programme, the School admits graduates from non-legal but related disciplines. This involves a certain level of risk regarding the legal quality of the scientific output and the Committee would suggest the close monitoring of such risks.

These issues have also been addressed above. We will address them once again in the general conclusions.

8. Additional for joint programmes
(ALL ESG)

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B. Conclusions and final remarks

We wish to thank the EEC for the professionalism they showed during the execution of their duties. The detailed discussion of all issues pertinent to the degree under evaluation, led to a fruitful discussion between the members of the EEC and the official representatives of the University and faculty members of the programme. The discussion proved to be extremely helpful due to the expertise of the members of the EEC and their willingness to share their suggestions and recommendations for further improving the programme. The demanding set of questions allowed us to elaborate on the pedagogical foundations of the programme and expand upon the content of the application form.

We have assessed and reviewed carefully the EEC report. We are pleased to note that the report is extremely positive, and we thank the EEC for their positive comments. We thank the external committee for concluding that it is very supportive of the PhD programme and did not identify any instances of non-compliance. We also thank the EEC for its clear positive evaluation and recommendation for accreditation of the Department.

We fully acknowledge that all programmes are always amenable to further improvement, and indeed we have been constantly working towards further improving our programme since it was initially accredited. Accordingly, the suggestions for further improvement offered by the EEC are taken very seriously into account. We consider the suggestions of the EEC as very helpful and we will try to incorporate them to the widest extent possible. Having said that, we acknowledge that, as the EEC has noted, the recommendations aim to the further improvement of an already fully compliant Department. We thank the committee for all the suggestions/recommendations. We address each one herein, for further improving the PhD programme.

1. The provision of adequate office space for those students who need it and a dedicated budget to support conference attendance and other research activities

Response/Action: We fully endorse the recommendation. This is a matter though that can only be addressed centrally by the University and needs to be approved by the Council. We will proceed and request additional office space once the Covid situation is over.

2. A reconsideration of the maximum word limit (80.000) of the Thesis.

Response/Action: we have already rectified this since we included in our PhD in Law Guide that the 80.000 words limit (which excludes footnotes, annexes, etc.) is indicative only and that the word length highly depends on the topic of the PhD at issue, thereby adding the necessary flexibility. Any decision on the length of the Thesis depends on the DPPC's decision that takes the circumstances of each case into account

3. Ensuring that a full Professor is always a member of the Supervisory Team if the main supervisor is an assistant Professor or an associate Professor.

Response/Action: We note the recommendation. The practice currently followed is in compliance with DIPAE guidelines and the University regulations. The practice currently followed by the Department is stricter than what the DIPAE guidelines provide for.

4. Considering whether all PhD applicants should be interviewed before their admission to the programme.

Response/Action: We find this a useful recommendation and we shall adopt it as necessary. The DPCC currently does not interview PhD applicants whenever it considers on the basis of the proposal that such an interview would not be necessary.

- 5. The School admits graduates from non-legal but related disciplines. This involves a certain level of risk regarding the legal quality of the scientific output and the Committee would suggest the close monitoring of such risks.**

Response/Action: We welcome this suggestion. We note that we strongly monitor both the acceptance and the progress of students coming from non-legal disciplines. In most cases before acceptance, we interview them. We then monitor their progress every 6 months (at least) through the completion of special forms (i.e. DS04 form every semester indicating the meetings supervisors had with the student and the goals set and DS05 form every year indicating the student's progress). If any problems are encountered the main supervisor reports them immediately to the DPPC that handles them accordingly

We would like to thank the committee once more, both for the positive and fair evaluation, as well as the constructive comments and suggestions and the fruitful discussion that we had with its members during the lengthy virtual visit. We also thank the committee for the time and thoroughness it dedicated to the evaluation of the PhD and for helping us improve the PhD through the suggestions made. All recommendations of the EEC refer to further improvement. The recommendations and evaluation of the committee are seriously taken into account for the further improvement of the programme. We consider this endorsement under the conditions of external peer review as a resounding vote of confidence in the PhD and its potential for academic success. We finally acknowledge the clear positive evaluation and recommendation for accreditation of the PhD.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Position</i> | <i>Signature</i> |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------|
| Philippos Pouyioutas | Professor, Rector | |
| Panayiotis Angelides | Professor, Vice Rector for Academic Affairs | |
| Achilles C. Emilianides | Professor, Dean | |
| Christina Ioannou | Associate Professor and Associate Dean | |
| Christos Papastylianos | Associate Professor and Head of the Department | |
| Irini Stamatoudi | Professor and PhD Programme Coordinator | |

Date: 4.11.2020