Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 04 September 2023

Higher Education Institution's Response

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

- **Town:** Nicosia

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

  In Greek:

  Διδακτορικό στις Ιατρικές Επιστήμες (3 Έτη / 180 ECTS, Διδακτορικό)

  In English:

  Doctoral Degree (PhD) in Medical Sciences (3 years / 180 ECTS, Doctoral Programme)

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

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

- **Concentrations (if any):**

  In Greek: Concentrations
  In English: Concentrations

A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1 or 300.1.1/1 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area. The answers' documentation should be brief and accurate and supported by the relevant documentation. Referral to annexes should be made only when necessary.*

- *In particular, under each assessment area and by using the 2nd column of each table, the HEI must respond on the following:*

    - *the areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
    - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The institution should respond to the EEC comments, in the designated area next each comment. The comments of the EEC should be copied from the EEC report **without any interference** in the content.*

- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on separate document(s). Each document should be in *.pdf format and named as annex1, annex2, etc.*

![CYQAA logo] ΔΙΠΑΕ CYQAA ΦΟΡΕΑΣ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΝΩΤΕΡΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ
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1. Study programme and study programme's design and development
(ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
We would advise that there is a formal Scientific Integrity Policy and obligatory training for all staff and students to evidence that they have undertaken.	The Medical School welcomes the advice of the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) and the opportunity to formalise how it supports and promotes scientific integrity. This takes place in several ways including, but not limited to, the following: 1) nurturing a supportive environment with diversity and inclusion as well as with transparent, and responsible policies for assessing, appointing, and promoting researchers; 2) providing competent supervision and mentoring offered to young researchers; 3) ensuring that data practices are compliant with the guidelines of the University Research Ethics Committee, the National Policy of the Republic of Cyprus for Open Science Practices, and the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee and EU legislation of GDPR, and that applications for ethics reviews and approvals are expected for all research activities; 4) ensuring that research collaborations are done responsibly and requiring policies and procedures, e.g., signed MoUs and data sharing agreements, that enshrine the protection of the integrity of projects. The Medical School's Research Committee has approved a Research Integrity Policy Statement, created in line with the principles of good research practices of ALLEA's European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. The policy statement is aimed at faculty, staff and students and its ongoing implementation will be monitored by the Research Committee. We have created an "Ethics in Research Workshop" on our learning platform (Moodle), which we have made compulsory for all PhD students. The training comprises the following sections: Introduction to good research practice; Data collection and sharing - guidelines and good practice; Data	Choose level of compliance:

	management - FAIR principles; and Data Management Plan. The training concludes with the completion of an online course on Research Integrity, and Research Ethics. PhD students will be required to provide evidence of course completion to the PhD programme administrator. Additionally, all students that are involved in clinical research will now be required to complete the certificate in Good Clinical Practice, available through the University of Oxford at: https://globalhealthtrainingcentre.tghn.org/ich-good-clinical-practice/. The training is also available to PhD supervisors and has been included in the Medical School's Faculty handbook under faculty trainings. The details of the policy statement and its principles will supplement existing mandatory training that is provided to faculty and students, such as the Ethics in Research & Publishing, Data Protection & Confidentiality webinar that forms part of the Research Skills Development Programme (RSDP).	
We would advise that formal consideration and explicit planning is undertaken around the involvement of external stakeholders, particularly patient/public involvement.	External stakeholders, including a patient group representative, are involved in high-level Medical School strategic decision making through our International Advisory Board (IAB). We have added an agenda item for the next meeting of the IAB, taking place in Fall 2023. This is to approve the creation of a working group of the IAB that will identify areas across all aspects of our work - teaching, research and social contribution – where we can enhance patient/ public involvement. At departmental and/or programmatic level, we are exploring further opportunities through the Federation of Patient Associations in Cyprus. However, in regards to existing involvement at committees, we have added a patient representative to the Medical School's Research Committee.	Choose level of compliance:

Sub-area	*Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant*
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Compliant
1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review	Compliant
1.3 Public information	Compliant
1.4 Information management	Compliant

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
Given the way that students feel that they work in partnership with supervisors, in the future and as the programme grows, we feel that a formal policy would provide a route for students to register complaints if required, independently from the Programme but ideally below the level of the rector.	We welcome the suggestion of the EEC to provide opportunities for students to be able to submit concerns and complaints at a level below that of the Rector and Vice Rector for Faculty and Research. Through its Associate Dean for Students, the Medical School has a procedure that allows for independence from the specific structures of the programme and which serves as a precursor to the complaints procedure. This route promotes the resolution of issues at a more informal level whilst still recognising that for some issues, students will need to raise the issue to a more senior level. Further signposting to this will be made as part of the orientation of all students and to provide them with clarity on the different support mechanisms available.	Choose level of compliance:
Greater links between the PhD students on the programme may be difficult given their wide dispersal, but should be considered within the programme and across the University. This would provide greater opportunities for peer learning and shared experience, as staff have already recognised.	We welcome this recommendation by the EEC. With the difficulties presented by COVID now behind us, we have been able to resume activities that bring together the PhD students as a community, such as the monthly journal club (during which a student leads a discussion around a journal paper), and presentations of their work (where students prepare a brief presentation based on their PhD work to date. This may range on their preliminary results or data collected, for example, and provide a brainstorming forum where problems can be raised and resolved, or good practices shared). We have created a dedicated forum on Moodle, our online learning	Choose level of compliance:

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	platform, to facilitate communication between our diverse group of PhD students. In addition, we have advised PhD students how to create a "PhD students society". Moreover, the University holds a variety of events throughout the year that are open to all students and alumni, such as music nights, exhibitions, cinematic screenings, webinars/workshops, and talks by guest speakers. These events are advertised on the UNIC website, as well as through the UNIC Student Portal, which all students have access to.	
We heard, in addition, student enthusiasm for some shared social events. We recognise these were in place before COVID, but there would be benefit in developing and signposting these again now.	We are pleased to confirm that we have re-instated the opportunities for shared social events. Based on feedback from our PhD students, these will take the form of various social gatherings. One such example is the dinner that takes place during the Fall and Spring semester orientation weeks, which all new and existing PhD students are invited to attend. At least 1-2 additional social events will take place, and our students will be key in deciding the type of activity that will take place. The events have been communicated to all PhD students via email, as well as signposted on Moodle.	Choose level of compliance:
We note that a proportion of PhD students undertake data collection and many aspects of their programme overseas, returning twice a year for programme requirements. Care should be undertaken that the QA processes for these students are fit for purpose and address potential differences, which may include data management requirements, for example.	PhD students who spend time abroad have access to equitable support, guidance, training and mentorship to succeed in their academic pursuits. This is facilitated through frequent online meetings of the student and the supervisory team. We ensure that students understand what is expected of them in terms of research, coursework, progress, and timelines. Monitoring of students' progress is still achieved through our official DSO forms and monitored by the DPPC and the	Choose level of compliance:

	Office of the VRFR, regardless of geographical location.	
	Further, we have made it our policy to provide additional local supervisor support or an on-site coordinator depending on the nature of the project and data collection. The local supervisor may be an external member of the PhD supervisory committee, or an additional official member of the research team. Their name and role is also clearly outlined in all relevant ethical approval and consent forms. The role of the local supervisor is key in ensuring that the PhD student can navigate the local regulations, guidelines and requirements for data collection, which are pivotal in applying and securing ethical approval from the relevant national research ethics committees where data collection will take place.	
	In addition to local regulations and requirements, we also provide guidance to all students for protecting the data being collected as described below:	
	- Data management guidance:	
	Login IDs and passwords usually are required for entering each specific database. Quality review/control is a joint responsibility of the main supervisor and the student involved.	
	With regards to data identifiability, subjects/patients will be assigned a unique ID code which appears in the project's database. All health record data submitted to the database are linked to the unique ID code. For the de-code list (a separate MS excel spreadsheet with identifiable data such as name, IDs, date of birth, address and phone numbers) students are informed that these data will be accessed for specific purposes only, e.g., to identify	

	and/or contact patient for follow up, data linkage, and only by approved personnel, and will NOT be stored in the database. Re-identification may only be necessary to match a participant who needs to be contacted for follow up and/or continuation of the treatment, patient safety concerns, unexpected findings or who needs specific treatment or treatment monitoring. - Data access and usage: The Main supervisor is appointed to manage requests for access to the data, ethical approvals and reports in collaboration with the student (and site coordinator). All requests are required to meet ethical standards. ONLY authorised users (controlled by the research group) are able to access the database. Any unapproved data usage is prohibited. Utilising the data from the database will strictly comply with ethical standards of the relevant local Bioethics Committee. Additionally, all students have to complete the "Ethics in Research Workshop" (available on our online learning platform Moodle), which provides further information and guidance on research integrity, data collection and data management. We also require each PhD student to develop an individualised Data Management Plan for their specific project needs (students are provided with information on what a DMP is and how to create one as part of the "Ethics in Research Workshop").	
The department should explicitly demonstrate and require that scientific data management is organised according to FAIR data principles.	As described above, the "Ethics in Research Workshop" provides information and guidance on scientific data management, including the FAIR principles. PhD students are required to develop a Data Management Plan (DMP) for	Choose level of compliance:

| | their individual project needs, within which they also describe how their specific data will be organised according to the FAIR principles. The application to the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee also requires applicants to clearly describe the scientific data management for the project. | |

Sub-area	*Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant*
2.1 Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology	Compliant
2.2 Practical training	Compliant
2.3 Student assessment	Compliant

3. Teaching staff
(ESG 1.5)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
CVs of academic staff should be published and regularly updated to inform and attract prospective students.	We are pleased to confirm that the CVs of our academic staff are published on the Medical School's website at: https://www.med.unic.ac.cy/about-us/faculty-and-staff/faculty/ The CV template used is that of the regulator, CYQAA. The School's HR team send reminders to faculty to update their CVs on an annual basis so that their most recent research activity is publicly available. Further, within the Research pages of the website, we provide details of our main research priorities: https://www.med.unic.ac.cy/research-mission-vision-and-values/research-priority-areas/	Choose level of compliance:
Associate Dean for Research should put a process in place to assure that all PhD supervisors are trained to supervise and have regular ongoing refresher opportunities.	The Associate Dean for Research and the Director of the PhD programme have now included the PhD supervisor training under the compulsory trainings that all new Faculty is required to complete. All new faculty will be invited by HR to complete the training within the first year of their employment. The training has also been added to the faculty handbook to inform any new faculty upon appointment. We welcome the Committee's suggestion for refresher opportunities for the PhD supervisor training. We now require Internal and External Supervisors to complete the training at the admission stage of the PhD student (if they have not done it in the last 3 years) and repeat the training every 3 years if they are still involved in PhD supervision. With regards to other training and professional development, the School offers to PhD supervisors a variety of opportunities including 'Personal	Choose level of compliance:

	Management, Time Management and Leadership Skills Workshop'; 'Faculty Professional Development workshop', and 'Seminar on Teaching and Learning Theory and Practice'. There are also opportunities for attending training and seminars offered by the University, such as 'Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education' and the 'Research Skills Development Programme'. Importantly, new Faculty Induction training ensures that they are familiarised with, the: • School's Research Strategy • Research Support Mechanisms and policies (at a School, University and R&IO level) • Students in Research programme • Publications Database • Tools for Academic Research (Turnitin, Qualtrics, Nvivo etc) • Research Section on our website • Faculty Research Section on Moodle-Funding resource	
We support the Department's longer-term strategy to focus its research towards the areas of strength.	We would like to thank the External Evaluation Committee for their support of our longer-term research strategy, towards areas of strengths, and provide our reassurances that we will be continuing to align our research to the areas of strength of the department. Two new recent developments allow us to widen our network and to build further on our strengths, as described below: A) The newly established collaboration between the UNIC Medical School, UNIC Medical Center and the Cy-Biobank (University of Cyprus), for the development of new (cohort) studies in Cyprus by jointly securing local and/or external funding. Following a scheduled information session that will highlight the objectives of the Biobank and the opportunities arising from it (scheduled for Autumn 2023), we will be inviting faculty to submit research proposals and PhD research projects	Choose level of compliance:

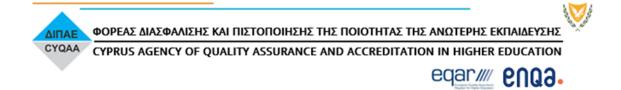|		
	that utilise the Biobank. The Biobank vision's for the *creation of new knowledge for improving human health, and contribution to the prevention, diagnosis, prognosis, and therapy of diseases* for *scientific, diagnostic and educational innovation* aligns with the School's Research Priority areas: (https://www.med.unic.ac.cy/research-mission-vision-and-values/research-priority-areas/). B) Our participation in a recently EU funded Alliance of 9 Young European Universities enables us to increase our partnerships and collaborations for grant applications and research projects. In addition, Global Health consists of the main key action area of the NEOLAiA consortium which aligns with our Medical School's future research focus on inclusivity and diversity, and studies on vulnerable populations such as refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Cyprus and other members states, as well as with the application of One Health approach for research on prevention and combat of health threats. These research priority areas also align with the latest (2022) EU Global Health Strategy.	
Efforts should be made to ensure greater alignment between Clinical and GHS academics, in terms of appointment, promotion and appraisal.	We welcome the recognition by the External Evaluation Committee of the benefits that the new legal framework will bring to Medical Schools and teaching hospitals in due course and the Medical School will continue to contribute constructively towards that end. The framework will promote the joint appointment of clinical academic faculty, further strengthening our relationship with public clinical providers in Cyprus and enabling recognition of their valuable contributions through mechanisms such as promotion and appraisal.	Choose level of compliance:

Sub-area	Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant
3.1 Teaching staff recruitment and development	Compliant
3.2 Teaching staff number and status	Compliant
3.2 Synergies of teaching and research	Compliant

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
No areas of improvement/ recommendations provided	Click or tap here to enter text.	Choose level of compliance:

Sub-area	*Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant*
4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria	Compliant
4.2 Student progression	Compliant
4.3 Student recognition	Compliant
4.4 Student certification	Compliant

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5. Learning resources and student support
(ESG 1.6)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
Given the ambition and expanding direction that research is taking, an all-encompassing plan across UNIC Health, to derive maximal benefit and impact from this investment is sensible.	We welcome the committee's support towards this direction. At this stage, we have already started to develop links with the other Schools under the UNIC Health umbrella, in the form of joint PhD student supervision (for example, there is a supervisory team including faculty of the Medical School, School of Life & Health Sciences and School of Veterinary Medicine), and the development of joint PhD projects that address inter-disciplinary topics under UNIC Health. Indicatively, the inter-disciplinary study referred to - that includes human medicine, veterinary medicine, and environmental science - aims to link the complexity of the lower gut microbiome of dairy cattle from Cypriot farms with parasitic infections and to determine how ecological pollution may impact cattle gut microbiome and cow's milk quality and safety. Parasites of importance that currently are under investigation include the Cryptosporidium species, but this is being expanded to other parasites of significance to public health. In addition, the interplay of the gut microbiome concerning antibiotic use, ambient air pollution and heavy metals, farming practices, and milk production in dairy cattle are being explored. Ultimately, this research aims to identify primary targets for sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices to maximise ruminant production	Choose level of compliance:

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	efficiency, reduce antibiotic use and improve animal and human welfare.	
	Further, we continue to encourage joint endeavours through mechanisms such as our annual PhD Scholarship calls, which will be opened to submission by other Schools under UNIC Health for joint projects. More widely in regard to seed funds for research, submissions have been recently opened to faculty of the School of Veterinary Medicine to apply for Seed funds.	
	We have additionally set dates for bi-weekly joint research meetings, which will become a regular opportunity for faculty across UNIC Health Schools to discuss and identify further opportunities. Each will commence with a 20 minute presentation by a faculty member, followed by questions, discussion and networking. Faculty have been invited and these will commence Wednesday 04th October 2023.	

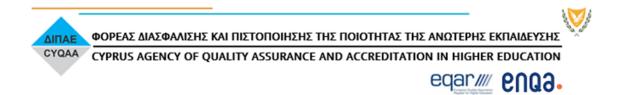| Sub-area	Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant
5.1 Teaching and Learning resources	Compliant
5.2 Physical resources	Compliant

6. Additional for doctoral programmes
(ALL ESG)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
We have noted that there are multiple documents required for tracking the process of each student. As the programme expands, a mechanism to bring these online would be useful, and perhaps a tailored approach of monitoring to improve efficiency.	We thank the committee for this useful recommendation, and are supportive of having an online repository (or portfolio) that enables easy tracking of all progress monitoring and other forms that would be accessible by the student, the supervisory committee and the PhD programme administration. We recognise that it would increase the efficiency of monitoring and ease of tracking the various monitoring forms and have taken steps to incorporate this into Moodle / Portal. The forms are already formatted so that they can be wholly filled and signed electronically. The importance of such an online tool is something that is recognised across the University, and the development of such a tool at the Medical School for the PhD is providing an opportunity for a wider trial.	Choose level of compliance:

Sub-area	*Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant*
6.1 Selection criteria and requirements	Compliant
6.2 Proposal and dissertation	Compliant
6.3 Supervision and committees	Compliant

7. Eligibility (Joint programme)
(ALL ESG)

Not Applicable

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B. Conclusions and final remarks

Conclusions and final remarks **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
A consistent feature of this programme is the positive and collegiate approach by students, academic and administrative staff. There is a real sense of shared purpose and common goals, and the leadership team should be commended for embracing this approach. Staff readily expressed their diversities, and how the international mix of staff was a draw to recruitment, and added to a learning environment that was supportive of those from all areas of society.	We thank the EEC for their encouraging and positive remarks. We will continue to maintain our all-encompassing approach through our transparent mechanisms and ongoing efforts to sustain good working relationships.	Choose level of compliance:
Particular note should be made to the newly appointed Programme Director, who has embedded herself well within departmental structures and has developed excellent knowledge and practice in directing the programme.	We are grateful to the EEC for their comment and acknowledgement of the significant efforts made by our PhD Programme Director across all aspects of the programme. At our institution, we remain fully committed to providing unwavering support to our dedicated academic and administrative teams in their pursuit of excellence.	Choose level of compliance:
There is a sense that the PhD programme, still emergent, is the result of the desire to provide career development opportunities for existing staff, and this is to be commended. The PhD programme in this case supports the overall strategic aims of the Department. Given the ambition and drive of the Department we are certain that this will grow to be a sustainable programme in its own right in time. Strategic alignment of research aims to provide some more focus will be useful in the mid-term.	We welcome the Committee's recognition of our PhD programme as a means for providing career and professional opportunities to affiliated staff (e.g. doctors and other healthcare professionals of affiliated clinical training sites), and for promoting the academic development of the local medical and scientific society. As the programme grows, we aim to encourage and support more medical and master students involved in research projects to continue and expand their research topic of interest within our PhD programme.

We strongly agree with the recommendation for a strategic | Choose level of compliance: |

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	alignment and in the mid-term this is something that we are also addressing in our revised PhD Research Proposal template, as well as our upcoming annual PhD scholarship applications by explicitly requiring applicants to include a discussion of how the proposed PhD project aligns with a specific research priority area. For the PhD scholarship applications, alignment with research priority areas has been added as an additional evaluation criterion. Our priorities are published on the School website. Whilst we encourage PhD applicants to develop proposals related to the School's research priorities areas (e.g., through providing this information on the PhD programme's webpages so that future applicants are aware of the areas) we prioritize allocating the School's PhD scholarships to areas that match to our strategic research priorities.	
We are sure that aspects such as the strong MBBS alumni network can be applied to PhD graduates in time. This would also apply to opportunities such as the biobank and expanded UNIC clinic. A careful evaluation of the capacity for a prospective cohort study is advisable, in line with health care needs or specific characteristics of the Cypriot population. We would suggest that this would make a strong case for internal and government funding (please refer to the Departmental evaluation).	We appreciate the Committee's comment regarding a PhD alumni network and we would like to confirm that all alumni services will be expanded to PhD graduates. These services, that exist for graduates from our other programmes, serve as a platform for alumni to connect with one another, stay engaged with their school's community, access exclusive resources and share institutional pride. Further, they provide an opportunity to connect with other graduates, personally and professionally, and build or expand their contact list after they have completed their studies, enabling them to explore career or community and volunteering opportunities.	Choose level of compliance:

		The School's Student Service Centre provides information and advice to our PhD student cohort on how to develop student clubs and societies, and have issued this information to the PhD students. Establishing such a PhD student club, which can also interact with other student clubs of the medical student community, and with which they can share their research experience and provide mentorship and guidance to medical students who are involved with research projects, is encouraged by the PhD programme team. This contact and interaction will become the bridge between medical / master programmes and our PhD programme and help recruit more medical/master alumni into our PhD programme.	
		The capacity for a prospective cohort study is certainly one of the research initiatives we are carefully evaluating. For example, we primarily discuss it with the Cy-Biobank and the University Medical Centre, since it will constitute a valuable resource to obtain scientific evidence oriented to the prevention and treatment of the main diseases of the population.	
		In addition, we recognize that securing funding for developing prospective studies will also provide many opportunities for PhD projects (funded and self-funded) and young researchers. We agree that this should remain one of the short-mid-term goals of our research strategy and are taking strides towards that direction, such as organising information sessions about the Biobank to facilitate the development of PhD projects that can utilise this important resource.	

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Professor Aleksandar Jovanovic	Head of BCS Department	
Dr Soulla Nicolaou	Associate Head of BCS Department	
Professor Joseph Joseph	Associate Dean for Academic Affairs	
Dr Nicoletta Nicolaou	PhD Programme Director	
Dr Danagra Ikossi	GE MD Programme Director	
Dr Chloe Antoniou	GE MD Assistant Programme Director	
Professor Paola Nicolaides	MBBS Course Director	
Ms Jill Griffiths	Director of Quality Assurance	
Mr Constantinos Christodoulides	Quality Assurance Officer	

Date: 04 September 2023