Doc. 300.1.1/2

Date: 17/9/2024

External Evaluation Report
(E-learning programme of study)

- **Higher Education Institution:
  Open University of Cyprus**

- **Town: Nicosia**

- **School/Faculty (if applicable): Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences**

- **Department/ Sector:** Department/Sector

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

  In Greek:

  PNYX: Πολιτική Ιστορία, Θεωρία και πράξη

  In English: PNYX: MA in Political History, Theory and Practice 1,5 Years (3-semester)/90 ECTS

  Programme Name

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

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

- **Concentrations (if any):**

  In Greek: Concentrations
  In English: Concentrations

ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟ
REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

A. Introduction

This part includes basic information regarding the onsite visit.

The EEC had a very productive onsite visit, prepared perfectly by the administrative and academic staff of the PNYX Program and the Open University of Cyprus. They all gave open and detailed answers to all the questions of the EEC, and the program included many ppt and video presentations regarding the academic environment in which the teaching staff, students, the IT team, librarians and administrative officers work. The EEC followed the agenda set by the CYQAA. The programme of the visit is attached.

B. External Evaluation Committee (EEC)

Name	*Position*	*University*
Konstantina Botsiou	Professor	University of Piraeus
Bert van den Brink	Professor	University of Utrecht
Daniel Riera Terrén	Professor	Open University of Catalonia
Maria Diplarou	Ph.D. student	University of Cyprus
Name	Position	University
Name	Position	University

C. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The external evaluation report follows the structure of assessment areas.*

- *At the beginning of each assessment area there is a box presenting:*
  (a) *sub-areas*
  (b) *standards which are relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)*
  (c) *some questions that EEC may find useful.*

- *The questions aim at facilitating the understanding of each assessment area and at illustrating the range of topics covered by the standards.*

- *Under each assessment area, it is important to provide information regarding the compliance with the requirements of each sub-area. In particular, the following must be included:*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

Strengths

A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

- *The EEC should state the compliance for each sub-area (Non-compliant, Partially compliant, Compliant), which must be in agreement with everything stated in the report. It is pointed out that, in the case of standards that cannot be applied due to the status of the HEI and/or of the programme of study, N/A (= Not Applicable) should be noted.*

- *The EEC should state the conclusions and final remarks regarding the programme of study as a whole.*

- ***The report may also address other issues which the EEC finds relevant.***

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

Sub-areas

  1.1 Policy for quality assurance
  1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review
  1.3 Public information
  1.4 Information management

1.1 Policy for quality assurance

Standards

- *Policy for quality assurance of the programme of study:*
    o *has a formal status and is publicly available*
    o *supports the organisation of the quality assurance system through appropriate structures, regulations and processes*
    o *supports teaching, administrative staff and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance*
    o *ensures academic integrity and freedom and is vigilant against academic fraud*
    o *guards against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff*
    o *supports the involvement of external stakeholders*

1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review

Standards

- *The programme of study:*
    o *is designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes*
    o *is designed by involving students and other stakeholders*
    o *benefits from external expertise*
    o *reflects the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (preparation for sustainable employment, personal development, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base)*
    o *is designed so that it enables smooth student progression*
    o *is designed so that the exams' and assignments' content corresponds to the level of the programme and the number of ECTS*
    o *defines the expected student workload in ECTS*
    o *includes well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate*
    o *is subject to a formal institutional approval process*

- *results in a qualification that is clearly specified and communicated, and refers to the correct level of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*
- *is regularly monitored in the light of the latest research in the given discipline, thus ensuring that the programme is up-to-date*
- *is periodically reviewed so that it takes into account the changing needs of society, the students' workload, progression and completion, the effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students, student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme*
- *is reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders*

1.3 Public information

Standards

- *Regarding the programme of study, clear, accurate, up-to date and readily accessible information is published about:*
  - *selection criteria*
  - *intended learning outcomes*
  - *qualification awarded*
  - *teaching, learning and assessment procedures*
  - *pass rates*
  - *learning opportunities available to the students*
  - *graduate employment information*

1.4 Information management

Standards

- *Information for the effective management of the programme of study is collected, monitored and analysed:*
  - *key performance indicators*
  - *profile of the student population*
  - *student progression, success and drop-out rates*
  - *students' satisfaction with their programmes*
  - *learning resources and student support available*
  - *career paths of graduates*

- *Students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.*

You may also consider the following questions:

- *What is the procedure for quality assurance of the programme and who is involved?*
- *Who is involved in the study programme's design and development (launching, changing, internal evaluation) and what is taken into account (strategies, the needs of society, etc.)?*
- *How/to what extent are students themselves involved in the development of the content of their studies?*
- *Please evaluate a) whether the study programme remains current and consistent with developments in society (labour market, digital technologies, etc.), and b) whether the content and objectives of the study programme are in accordance with each other?*
- *Do the content and the delivery of the programme correspond to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)?*
- *How is coherence of the study programme ensured, i.e., logical sequence and coherence of courses? How are substantial overlaps between courses avoided? How is it ensured that the teaching staff is aware of the content and outputs of their colleagues' work within the same study programme?*
- *How does the study programme support development of the learners' general competencies (including digital literacy, foreign language skills, entrepreneurship, communication and teamwork skills)?*
- *What are the scope and objectives of the foundation courses in the study programme (where appropriate)? What are the pass rates?*
- *How long does it take a student on average to graduate? Is the graduation rate for the study programme analogous to other European programmes with similar content? What is the pass rate per course/semester?*
- ***How is it ensured that the actual student workload is in accordance with the workload expressed by ECTS?***
- *What are the opportunities for international students to participate in the study programme (courses/modules taught in a foreign language)?*
- *Is information related to the programme of study publicly available?*
- *How is the HEI evaluating the success of its graduates in the labor market? What is the feedback from graduates of the study programme on their employment and/or continuation of studies?*
- *Have the results of student feedback been analysed and taken into account, and how (e.g., when planning in-service training for the teaching staff)?*
- *What are the reasons for dropping out (voluntary withdrawal)? What has been done to reduce the number of such students?*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

PNYX is a one and a half year (3-semester) interdisciplinary Master's Programme in Political History, Theory and Practice. It comprises of 6 modules/thematic units of 15 ECTS each and offers in total

90 ECTS. The modules are arranged in 3 semesters corresponding to the three areas of inquiry: Theory (1st semester), History (2nd semester), Practice (3rd semester). Each semester consists of two Modules. More specifically, students attend in Theory: Aspects of political, economic, social and historical theory, in History: Aspects of Greek, Cypriot, European and World history and in Practice: Legal and Rhetorical questions. Each semester consists of 2 modules. Full-time students attend 2 modules of 2,5 hours per semester, whereas part-time students attend one module. Each member of the teaching staff is the instructor in his/her module and has the opportunity to invite external speakers to make presentations and communicate with the students. The students can choose between a thesis and a non-thesis MA degree. To obtain a thesis-degree they must complete the 4 compulsory modules of the first 2 semesters and write a master's thesis of 12,000-15,000 words (30 ECTS) which is equivalent to the 2 elective courses of the 3rd semester.

The MA programme attracts audiences from various backgrounds: historians, journalists, politicians, political scientists, international organizations executives, educators, political communication experts, international and European law specialists, and more generally and importantly politically active citizens, namely individuals who wish to acquire the necessary analytical tools for engaging in the public sphere. The MA programme also addresses graduates of diverse BA degrees who aim to deepen and expand their knowledge in postgraduate studies that is graduates in history, political science, philosophy, economics, law, European Studies and so forth.

Although the PNYX is a relatively new MA programme as its started operating in the academic year 2020-2021, following its approval by CyQAA, it has followed from the beginning the quality assurance processes of the Open University of Cyprus (OUC), which are particularly fair and transparent regarding structures, regulations and processes. The change from 120 ECTS to 90 ECTS has complied with these procedures. The Academic Coordinator of the Programme submitted a detailed request and a justification report to the relevant School and the issue was forwarded to the Studies' Committee. After its approval it was submitted to the Senate of the OUC. An Internal Evaluation Report was submitted on the 11th of July 2024 according to the evaluation procedures of OUC programmes, and the conditions and procedures set up by the Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education which also work in accordance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The Academic Coordinator of the MA Programme signed the Internal Evaluation Report, and provided detailed information about programme (content, strategy, faculty, teaching staff, students, external stakeholders, and so forth).

The PNYX MA programme encourages teaching and administrative staff, students and external stakeholders to participate in quality assurance procedures and is particularly alert on issues of academic integrity, discrimination and freedom. Academic fraud is not tolerated and the IT staff is vigilant on this. Both students and external stakeholders are particularly positive about the knowledge, skills and experience gained in the programme.

The strategy of the MA programme is defined by the Senate, the Academic Coordinator, and the teaching staff who also give feedback from the students. These organs are responsible for strategic decisions like the offer of the PNYX MA programme in the Greek language, in order to be competitive in Greece, Cyprus, and Greek-speaking communities and individuals around the world; the height of tuition fees that will be shortly reduced in order to make this MA more competitive; the option provided to students for a thesis- or non-thesis MA degree, and so forth. The Programme corresponds to the needs of society as it produces in-depth knowledge of current political affairs in

an inter-disciplinary fashion. Graduates of the programme have improved and furthered their professional careers or have modified their careers, turning e.g. to politics, international organizations, education, museums etc. It also offers a rare combination of modern history with political science, law and rhetoric, since history, even modern history, usually co-exists in the Greek tradition with archaeology, or it supports international relations and political science undergraduate and graduate programs. This programme is very useful for professionals who want to grasp the historical dynamics behind modern and contemporary political decisions and social processes

The PNYX MA Programme is described analytically on the OUC website. Information about the programme is also being rapidly disseminated through online and offline social networks. The website as well as the administrative and teaching staff provide all needed information to the students regarding selection and assessment criteria, intended learning outcomes, employment opportunities. Students are engaged in exams, presentations and other activities of the programme, and they receive constant information concerning conferences, and seminars outside the OUC, or other programs (e.g. ERASMUS Mundus).

The students are usually professionals that prefer distance-learning MA programs, with a heavy load of family and professional responsibilities. It is still early to assess the drop-out rates but they have fallen in recent years from 48% (in 2020-21) to 25% (in 2022-23) and 6,25% (in 2023-24). The same applies to the students who are being dismissed, since the programme operates in the last 4 years and the students are being offered the option to study from a minimum of 1,5 to a maximum of 6 years and then may apply to the OUC Senate for prolongation of studies. Students are very satisfied with their studies and would like to see the addition of courses, regarding e.g. internal politics. They would also prefer a thesis-MA if they did not have to choose between the thesis and the courses it replaces.

Their workload is logical, and the ECTS are derived from the several projects they must complete within each course, namely exams, quizzes, essays, presentations, discussions with the teaching staff and external speakers. They prepare in advance for every session, having to choose from a great variety of books, e-journals, videos, etc. and they are also graded for class participation. The modules do not overlap considerably, since the MA Programme is based on the study of different areas, but its inter-disciplinarity creates positive correlations. The graduation rate is rather low (3-4 students). The switch of the 120 ECTS programme to a 90 ECTS programme has helped the PNYX to reduce the number of drop-outs. Another measure that will help the programme flourish is the decrease of tuition fees. Voluntary withdrawal is mainly due to health, professional or family reasons. Their feedback is being taken into account in designing or re-designing the program.

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

The PNYX programme is an innovative, intensive inter-disciplinary distance learning program. It engages teaching staff s and students and offers a rare theoretical and practical insight into political history.

It allows graduates from various fields to advance their knowledge and skills in their area of interest.

The PNYX Programme prepares students to be able to communicate more properly and cultivate their political skills, in order to be responsible citizens or engage more deeply in politics.

The programme has a good focus and flexibility (e.g. in the offer of part-time studies, or the writing of MA thesis also in English).

It is gender-balanced and encourages students to upgrade their knowledge and pursue more demanding professional careers.

The teaching staff is available around the clock, although they have fixed office hours. Students can email them or communicate through the eClass which serves the multitasking of a distance-learning programme.

Teachers and students go through special IT seminars in order that familiarize them with the tools available and the way they can be used for the purposes of learning.

The quality of the academic team and the IT group is very high, since they are all highly skilled, qualified and active in research.

The courses are consistent with the "brochure" and the aims of the programme.

The administrative staff is numerous, well-educated, efficient and always available to solve problems and offer solutions.

Areas of improvement and recommendations
A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

The EEC is concerned with the lack of an obligatory MA thesis, as this would help students to become more active in systematic, in-depth research and prepare them for further studies. An alternative would be the writing of a Policy paper of more or less the same length as the optional thesis (12,000-15,000 words). Important is that the students will not need to "sacrifice" courses in order to undertake an MA thesis as this is a disincentive.

AI could be integrated in the curriculum as it happens in other academic programmes on order to address contemporary needs and concerns.

The faculty members should be increased as the ratio between teachers and students is rather demanding for the members of the teaching staff that have to deal with many different activities of the programme.

Another issue of concern is the fact that the teachers and students of the programme do not have the opportunity to meet in-person in a conference or summer school especially designated for that. In person communication could help them discuss about strengths and weaknesses of the programme and enable them to network for future collaborations in the academic or professional field in all directions (teachers to teachers, teachers to students, students to students).

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

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

ΔΙΠΑΕ ΦΟΡΕΑΣ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΝΩΤΕΡΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ
CYQAA CYPRUS AGENCY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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

Sub-areas

2.1 Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology
2.2 Practical training
2.3 Student assessment
2.4 Study guides structure, content and interactive activities

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2.1 Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology

Standards

- *The e-learning methodology is appropriate for the particular programme of study.*
- *Expected teleconferences for presentations, discussion and question-answer sessions, and guidance are set.*
- *A specific plan is developed to safeguard and assess the interaction:*
    - *among students*
    - *between students and teaching staff*
    - *between students and study guides/material of study*
- *Training, guidance and support are provided to the students focusing on interaction and the specificities of e-learning.*
- *The process of teaching and learning supports students' individual and social development.*
- *The process of teaching and learning is flexible, considers different modes of e-learning delivery, where appropriate, uses a variety of pedagogical methods and facilitates the achievement of planned learning outcomes.*
- *Students are encouraged to take an active role in creating the e-learning process.*
- *The implementation of student-centered learning and teaching encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher.*
- *Teaching methods, tools and material used in teaching are modern, effective, support the use of modern educational technologies and are regularly updated.*
- *Mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship is promoted.*
- *The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths.*
- *Appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints regarding the process of teaching and learning are set.*

2.2 Practical training

Standards

- *Practical and theoretical studies are interconnected.*
- *The organisation and the content of practical training, if applicable, support achievement of planned learning outcomes and meet the needs of the stakeholders.*

2.3 Student assessment

Standards

- *A complete assessment framework is designed, focusing on e-learning methodology, including clearly defined evaluation criteria for student assignments and the final examination.*
- *Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures.*
- *Assessment is appropriate, transparent, objective and supports the development of the learner.*
- *The criteria for the method of assessment, as well as criteria for marking, are published in advance.*
- *Assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the e-learning process.*
- *Assessment, where possible, is carried out by more than one examiner.*
- *A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.*
- *Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field.*
- *The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances.*

2.4 Study guides structure, content and interactive activities

Standards

- *A study guide for each course, fully aligned with e-learning philosophy and methodology and the need for student interaction with the material is developed. The study guide should include, for each course week / module, the following:*
  - *Clearly defined objectives and expected learning outcomes of the programme, of the modules and activities in an organised and coherent manner*
  - *Presentation of course material, and students' activities on a weekly basis, in a variety of ways and means (e.g. printed material, electronic material, teleconferencing, multimedia)*
  - ***Weekly schedule of interactive activities and exercises (i.e. simulations, problem solving, scenarios, argumentation)***
  - *Clear instructions for creating posts, discussion, and feedback*
  - *Self-assessment exercises and self-correction guide*
  - *Bibliographic references and suggestions for further study*
  - *Number of assignments/papers and their topics, along with instructions and additional study material*
  - *Synopsis*
- *Study guides, material and activities are appropriate for the level of the programme according to the EQF.*

You may also consider the following questions:

- *Is the nature of the programme compatible with e-learning delivery?*
- *How do the programme, the material, the facilities, and the guidelines safeguard the interaction between students, students and teaching staff, students and the material?*
- *How many students upload their work and discuss it in the platform during the semester?*
- *How is it monitored that the teaching staff base their teaching and assessment methods on objectives and intended learning outcomes? Provide samples of examination papers (if available).*
- *How are students' different abilities, learning needs and learning opportunities taken into consideration when conducting educational activities?*
- *How is the development of students' general competencies (including digital skills) supported in educational activities?*
- *How is it ensured that innovative teaching methods, learning environments and learning aids that support learning are diverse and used in educational activities?*
- *Is the teaching staff using new technology in order to make the teaching process more effective?*
- *How is it ensured that theory and practice are interconnected in teaching and learning?*
- *How is practical training organised (finding practical training positions, guidelines for practical training, supervision, reporting, feedback, etc.)? What role does practical training have in achieving the objectives of the study programme? What is student feedback on the content and arrangement of practical training?*
- ***Are students actively involved in research? How is student involvement in research set up?***
- *How is supervision of student research papers (seminar papers, projects, theses, etc.) organised?*
- ***Do students' assessments correspond to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)?***
- *How are the assessment methods chosen and to what extent do students get supportive feedback on their academic progress during their studies?*
- *How is the objectivity and relevance of student assessment ensured (assessment of the degree of achievement of the intended learning outcomes)?*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

We recognize the suitability of the proposed programme for distance learning (DL) delivery. The University, being fully online, has a proven track record of successfully offering numerous programs in this modality, demonstrating a commitment to providing excellent service to students.

As detailed in assessment area 5, the chosen Learning Management System (LMS) for the programme is eClass (Moodle-based), which is already well-integrated within the University's ecosystem. Its widespread adoption and stability make it a reliable choice, familiar to both faculty and students. The complementary tools selected for teaching are also well-chosen. Apart from some synchronous activities, most of the studying and activities are very flexible and can be completed

by students at any time and place they choose. Those who cannot attend to synchronous activities can access the recordings later.

The programme offers six 15 ECTS courses, each divided into four parts to comprehensively cover all aspects of the module. There is a common structure and overall design shared by all of them. At the beginning of the course, there is an Introductory Group Advisory Meeting, and at the end, a Final Group Advisory Meeting to prepare for the exam. During the course, there are eight synchronous teleconferences (2.5 hours each) that include presentations, Q&A sessions, and online debates.

Each course has a comprehensive study guide, and the resources offered to students are appropriate to help them acquire the expected skills and competencies. These resources are varied and well-chosen by the teachers.

Evaluation consists of a final exam (60%), two written assignments (30%), and other interactive exercises (10%). Identity and authorship in student assessment, which have become especially important issues since the advent of generative AI, are ensured through two technologies: Turnitin for plagiarism detection (giving teachers clues about the probability of copying) in written assignments, and a proctoring tool for final exams. This tool monitors the computer where the exam is taken, as well as the environment through the camera, microphone, and a 360º scan prior to the exam.

We would like to highlight the work done by the LEMM (Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology), which is responsible for providing pedagogical support in the design, creation, implementation, and evaluation of online courses. It also delivers training to educators (both full-time teachers and tutors) on the tools used and eLearning strategies and methodologies. For example, the course "Introduction to Distance Teaching, Learning, and Assessment" (2 ECTS) introduces academics to the design, technologies, and strategies used in eLearning courses.

Students are allowed to choose between developing a Master's thesis or completing an alternative course. Most of them opt for the latter. This is uncommon in other EU countries, where a Master's thesis is compulsory for all students to earn their degree. This flexibility can create issues and represents a missed opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the programme.

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

The University's LEMM appears to be doing an excellent job supporting the faculty in designing their classes. The balance between this support and respect for academic freedom remains intact.

Resources are multimodal and highly diverse, and the library effectively meets the needs of students.

The consistent structure across different courses helps students feel confident and comfortable, ensuring they do not feel lost on campus. They always know what to expect next.

Teleconferences are highly valued by students as they are productive and help them maintain the pace of the course.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

Our main concern is the absence of a mandatory Master's thesis for all students. Cypriot law allows students to choose whether or not to complete a thesis, which can pose challenges for graduates seeking admission to PhD programs in other countries. Even if a student is not interested in an academic career, we believe they should have the opportunity to consolidate their acquired knowledge into a final project and defend it through an oral presentation. In fact, there are alternatives to a research-driven Master's thesis, such as a professional thesis or a policy paper. However, we believe that students should integrate the skills and competencies learned throughout the programme into a final comprehensive work.

Evaluation is getting a big issue in online learning programs. Accreditation of identity and authorship is not an easy question. Although we think the OUC is doing a good job, it is of an extreme importance to go on working on the improvement in this field: double camera for the proctoring, oral exams, etc. are possible paths of improvement.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		*Non-compliant/* *Partially Compliant/Compliant*
2.1	Process of teaching and learning and student-centered teaching methodology	Compliant
2.2	Practical training	Compliant
2.3	Student assessment	Compliant
2.4	Study guides structure, content and interactive activities	Compliant

3. **Teaching staff** *(ESG 1.5)*

Sub-areas

3.1 Teaching staff recruitment and development
3.2 Teaching staff number and status
3.3 Synergies of teaching and research

3.1 Teaching staff recruitment and development

Standards

- *Institutions ensure the competence of their teaching staff.*
- *Fair, transparent and clear processes for the recruitment and development of the teaching staff are set up.*
- *Teaching staff qualifications are adequate to achieve the objectives and planned learning outcomes of the study programme, and to ensure quality and sustainability of the teaching and learning.*
- *The teaching staff is regularly engaged in professional and teaching-skills training and development.*
- *Training, guidance and support are provided to the teaching staff focusing on interaction and the specificities of e-learning.*
- *Promotion of the teaching staff takes into account the quality of their teaching, their research activity, the development of their teaching skills and their mobility.*
- *Innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies is encouraged.*
- *Conditions of employment that recognise the importance of teaching are followed.*
- *Recognised visiting teaching staff participates in teaching the study programme.*

3.2 Teaching staff number and status

Standards

- *The number of the teaching staff is adequate to support the programme of study.*
- *The teaching staff status (rank, full/part time) is appropriate to offer a quality programme of study.*
- *Visiting staff number does not exceed the number of the permanent staff.*

3.3 Synergies of teaching and research

Standards

- *The teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the HEI and with partners outside (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other HEIs in Cyprus or abroad).*
- *Scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research is encouraged.*
- *The teaching staff publications are within the discipline.*

- *Teaching staff studies and publications are closely related to the programme's courses.*
- *The allocation of teaching hours compared to the time for research activity is appropriate.*

You may also consider the following questions:

- *Is the teaching staff qualified to teach in the e-learning programme of study?*
- *How are the members of the teaching staff supported with regard to the development of their teaching skills? How is feedback given to members of the teaching staff regarding their teaching results and teaching skills?*
- *How is the teaching performance assessed? How does their teaching performance affect their remuneration, evaluation and/or selection?*
- *Is teaching connected with research?*
- *Does the HEI involve visiting teaching staff from other HEIs in Cyprus and abroad?*
- *What is the number, workload, qualifications and status of the teaching staff (rank, full/part timers)?*
- *Is student evaluation conducted on the teaching staff? If yes, have the results of student feedback been analysed and taken into account, and how (e.g., when planning in-service training for the teaching staff)?*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

The teaching staff is most certainly qualified to teach in the e-learning programme. All teaching faculty have Ph.D.s and are active researchers in their fields of expertise within the programme. Indeed, the teaching of individual courses is left to specialists in the field, who are recognized researchers and teaching specialists with extensive national and international experience. All academic fields relevant for the interdisciplinary programme are covered.

The University's LEMM (Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology) and other facilities provide pedagogical support in the design, creation, implementation, and evaluation of online courses. It also delivers training to educators (both full-time teachers and tutors) on the tools used and eLearning strategies and methodologies. For example, the course "Introduction to Distance Teaching, Learning, and Assessment" (2 ECTS) introduces academics to the design, technologies, and strategies used in eLearning courses. All teaching staff in the programme took this course. Support for teachers in this respect is very good.

With the exception of the Academic Coordinator, all teachers in the programme work as tutors, adjunct faculty on temporary contracts. Such contracts tend to be renewed upon good performance and the current set of tutors have proven themselves to be a good team.

Students offer feedback for the Programme of Study, the Courses and their teachers in OUC through an anonymous online evaluation questionnaire at the end of each academic semester, the results of which are communicated to the Academic Heads of the Programs and the faculty and AF members and are taken into account for improvements, where necessary. The individual evaluation

ΔΙΠΑΕ
CYQAA

ΦΟΡΕΑΣ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΝΩΤΕΡΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ
CYPRUS AGENCY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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of each Faculty Member and each AF Member is sent to him/her to improve his/her teaching approach. With the aim of recognizing the didactic excellence, upgrading the quality of the teaching work and the dissemination of good teaching practices applied in the OUC, from the academic year 2019-2020 an "Excellent Teaching Award" has been instituted, which is awarded exclusively to AF members of OUC, as an incentive to attract, better performance, but also to maintain their collaboration.

Teaching is connected with research, as stated above, albeit that this research is not linked to main research programmes of the University. Rather, the tutors tend to work and do their research at other institutions or in their own time next to tutoring contracts at several universities.

Some visiting lectures may be integrated on individual-guest basis, but the courses are organized in a quite rigid format which does not allow for much flexibility. Guest lectures do occur though, and are experienced as enriching by the students especially when lecturers relate directly to topics relating to the regional embeddedness of the programme.

The programme is taught by one Academic Coordinator, an assistant professor, and five Adjunct Faculty tutors, who all hold temporary or permanent positions at other institutions the Open University of Cyprus as well. The committee found that the share of Adjunct Faculty among the teaching staff is very high: 5/6th of the total faculty available (although in hours the academic coordinator is likely to spend more hours on the programme as a whole).

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

The strengths of the teaching staff are in their relative seniority with regard to their experience and research records. Students work with real experts who competently guide them on their path to greater knowledge, skills and competence in the field of study. The teaching team demonstrates great commitment and loyalty to the programme, students are satisfied with the quality of teaching and the coordination of the programme as a whole.

Areas of improvement and recommendations
A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

Our committee wants to point out that the balance between adjunct faculty and permanent faculty in the programme seems out of sync. There is a considerable weakness that comes with the University and programme being *strongly* dependent on external research activities and hence academic seniority of the teaching staff. Should some tutors accept positions elsewhere, it is unclear how continuity of the link between research and education within the courses and hence the programme could be warranted. Solutions are too dependent on individual availability of expertise in tutors and hence not sufficiently sustainable as part of the internal organization and research focus on the institution. Although legally allows, for these reasons, the committee deems the standard subareas 3.2. and 3.3. to be incompletely covered.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

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

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

Sub-areas

   4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria
   4.2 Student progression
   4.3 Student recognition
   4.4 Student certification

4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria

Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student admission are in place.*
- *Access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.*

4.2 Student progression

Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student progression are in place.*
- *Processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression, are in place.*

4.3 Student recognition

Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student recognition are in place.*
- *Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility.*
- *Appropriate recognition procedures are in place that rely on:*
  - *institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention*
  - *cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country*

4.4 Student certification

Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student certification are in place.*

- *Students receive certification explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.*

You may also consider the following questions:

- *Are the admission requirements for the study programme appropriate? How is the students' prior preparation/education assessed (including the level of international students, for example)?*
- *How is the procedure of recognition for prior learning and work experience ensured, including recognition of study results acquired at foreign higher education institutions?*
- *Is the certification of the HEI accompanied by a diploma supplement, which is in line with European and international standards?*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

The MA Programme accepts applications from holders of an accredited Bachelor's degree at the time of registration, or students that will hold an accredited Bachelor's degree by July 31st, of the previous academic year of the academic year they will commence their studies at the Open University of Cyprus, or Holders of a certificate that they have completed all their academic obligations and the award of an accredited Bachelor's degree is pending. Other more practical language and skills requirements are clearly specified and published. Student admission, processes and criteria are up to standard and published accordingly.

With regard to student progression the rules and expectations regarding student progression are clear and published in a transparent manner. Our committee does find that the drop-out rate is high, although not as high as it was initially, and that University allows of slow progression of students given their loaded life agenda's as part-time students. Students are allowed up to 6 years for completing the programme. The committee acknowledges that this can be helpful for students but would want to see greater attention to a support system for students staying in the programme and not dropping out. In other words, the monitoring and support of individual students with such challenges could be intensified.

Student recognition is organized well, as is necessary for a programme with students who have diverse and experienced professional and academic backgrounds before seeking admission to this particular programme. The programme is advised on these matters by the Academic Affairs department as well as those responsible for Student Well-being in order to make individualized judgements about, for instance, student needs. Formal aspects of the student recognition processes are processed through the legally set mechanisms as specified under 4.3.

Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student certification are in place, they follow university and national standards, as well as international standards for the European Higher Education area.

Students receive certification explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed. These are of such a nature that future employers and institutions of Higher Education can easily assess their status.

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

The Open University of Cyprus is well-organized with regard to handling these matters of student admission, recognition and certification. The strict organization of the formal aspects is accompanied by an impressive culture of availability among staff who support students in responding to their questions and needs. This sets an example for culturally embedded recognition and respect, which adds to the generally positive student experience in the programme.

Areas of improvement and recommendations
A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

The Vice-Rector and the Head of Academic Affairs have explained to the committee that the programme faces some challenges with regard to international recognition of this (and other) remote programmes of teaching. Although the diploma finds recognition within the European Higher Education area and is received will in extra-academic fields in that same area, there are institutions outside of Europe who do not recognize a full status to the diplomacy, Open University of China was mentioned as an example. Here, the solution should be sought at state and European level diplomacy regarding higher education. We recommend that the Open University of Cyprus keep bringing this issue to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth which should actively stand for this within Europe and in international negotiations regarding such matters. Also, representations could be made through embassies with regard to the need to have the MA Program recognized.

The establishment and strengthening of the academic advisor system would significantly benefit both students and the academic program. A well-structured advising framework ensures that students receive appropriate guidance on course selection, degree planning, and academic progress, ultimately promoting timely graduation and academic success. Moreover, fostering a clear understanding among students about the role and availability of academic advisors would enhance their ability to address academic and life challenges. This may help address the dropping out problem.

In addition, the organization of an *online open day* for prospective students may help the students understand how to make well-informed decisions about their choice of program and get a clearer picture of the context of the program.

It would be advantageous to explore potential collaborative models employed by comparable academic institutions and research centres, to foster productive partnerships.

Students could be more actively encouraged to take *advantage of opportunities* such as Erasmus+ programs or internships. Engaging with practical, real-world experiences would offer them a more solid foundation for their academic and professional development.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

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

5. **Learning resources and student support** *(ESG 1.6)*

Sub-areas

5.1 Teaching and Learning resources
5.2 Physical resources
5.3 Human support resources
5.4 Student support

5.1 Teaching and Learning resources

Standards

- *Weekly interactive activities per each course are set.*
- *The e-learning material and activities take advantage of the capabilities offered by the virtual and audio-visual environment and the following are applied:*
  - *Simulations in virtual environments*
  - *Problem solving scenarios*
  - *Interactive learning and formative assessment games*
  - *Interactive weekly activities with image, sound and unlimited possibilities for reality reconstruction and further processing based on hypotheses*
  - *They have the ability to transfer students to real-life situations, make decisions, and study the consequences of their decisions*
  - *They help in building skills both in experiences and attitudes like in real life and also in experiencing - not just memorizing knowledge*
- *A pedagogical planning unit for e-learning, which is responsible for the support of the e-learning unit and addresses the requirements for study materials, interactive activities and formative assessment in accordance to international standards, is established.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*

- *All resources are fit for purpose.*
- *Student-centred learning and flexible modes of e-learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources.*

5.2 Physical resources

Standards

- *Physical resources, i.e. premises, libraries, study facilities, IT infrastructure, are adequate to support the study programme.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*
- *All resources are fit for purpose and students are informed about the services available to them.*

5.3 Human support resources

Standards

- *Human support resources, i.e. tutors/mentors, counsellors, other advisers, qualified administrative staff, are adequate to support the study programme.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*
- *All resources are fit for purpose and students are informed about the services available to them.*

5.4 Student support

Standards

- *Student support is provided covering the needs of a diverse student population, such as mature, part-time, employed and international students and students with special needs.*
- *Students are informed about the services available to them.*
- *Student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing student support.*
- *Students' mobility within and across higher education systems is encouraged and supported.*

You may also consider the following questions:

- *Evaluate the supply of teaching materials and equipment (including teaching labs, expendable materials, etc.), the condition of classrooms, adequacy of financial resources to conduct the study programme and achieve its objectives. What needs to be supplemented/ improved?*

- *What is the feedback from the teaching staff on the availability of teaching materials, classrooms, etc.?*
- *Are the resources in accordance with actual (changing) needs and contemporary requirements? How is the effectiveness of using resources ensured?*
- *What are the resource-related trends and future risks (risks arising from changing numbers of students, obsolescence of teaching equipment, etc.)? How are these trends taken into account and how are the risks mitigated?*
- *Evaluate student feedback on support services. Based on student feedback, which support services (including information flow, counselling) need further development?*
- *How is student learning within the standard period of study supported (student counselling, flexibility of the study programme, etc.)?*
- *How students' special needs are considered (different capabilities, different levels of academic preparation, special needs due to physical disabilities, etc.)?*
- *How is student mobility being supported?*

Findings

A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.

The University's LEMM (Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology) is responsible for providing pedagogical support in the design, creation, implementation, and evaluation of online courses. It also delivers training to educators (both full-time teachers and tutors) on the tools used and eLearning strategies and methodologies. For example, the course "Introduction to Distance Teaching, Learning, and Assessment" (2 ECTS) introduces academics to the design, technologies, and strategies used in eLearning courses.

To assist teachers, LEMM proposes common criteria, develops guides, offers webinars, and defines templates. This foundation enables academia to create their courses in an online environment, allowing them to include appropriate resources for every scenario, such as interactive exercises, self-assessments, simulations, and gamification. Additionally, LEMM helps students, especially first-time enrollees, to familiarize themselves with the virtual campus and the services available in their studies.

As detailed in assessment area 2 each proposed course is divided into four parts to cover all aspects of the module comprehensively. At the beginning of the course, there is an Introductory Group Advisory Meeting, and at the end, a Final Group Advisory Meeting to prepare for the exam. During the course, there are eight synchronous teleconferences (2.5 hours each) that include presentations, Q&A sessions, and online debates. Evaluation consists of a final exam (60%), two written assignments (30%), and other interactive exercises (10%).

The University offers a full library service to students, granting access to a wide range of publications (both in Greek and English), especially in digital form. The library strategy includes subscriptions to over 150 book databases, access through OpenAthens, and agreements with other distance universities.

The main infrastructure of the University is the virtual campus, eClass (Moodle-based), which has been evolving since 2007 and is well-known and stable. Synchronous meetings are conducted in ClassCollaborate, but will soon transition to a better tool (eClass Zoom). Other tools are used to record or create videos, develop online courses, and create simulations. This infrastructure can easily adapt to an increase in the number of students if necessary (e.g., by increasing hardware resources and licenses).

Student feedback is systematically gathered at the end of each semester through a questionnaire. This feedback is instrumental for teachers to refine their courses and ensure that tutors provide good service to students. Students and alumni are generally very satisfied with the quality of service received. They also report good and fast communication with both academia and management staff and are well-informed about grants, the Erasmus program, etc.

The University appears to be attentive to the needs of students with disabilities, adapting resources or assessments as necessary. They also offer psychological services to students if needed.

Regarding human resources, as introduced in assessment area 3, we would like to highlight that although the University's academic structure is sound and well-designed to scale if necessary, there are few full-time teachers. This might pose a risk of limited time for research and innovation for these teachers.

Strengths

A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.

The University's LEMM appears to be doing an excellent job supporting the academia in designing their classes. The balance between this support and respect for academic freedom remains intact.

The virtual campus is functioning properly, is stable, and is well-known by all the university staff. Additionally, new proposals and tools are being tested and developed to ensure continuous improvement.

Resources are multimodal and highly diverse, and the library effectively meets the needs of students.

Students are satisfied with the communication, the teachers, the content, and the quality of the programme.

Areas of improvement and recommendations
A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.

The EEC finds that the low number of full-time teachers might pose a risk if they do not maintain a balance between teaching, research, and innovation.

Another risk is the reliance on too many external resources. The University does not control these resources and may face issues if, for instance, they are removed or if the licensing terms change.

We believe that extending the synchronous teleconferences to 3 hours might be beneficial as it enables more comprehensive discussion and longer presentations by guest speakers.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant
5.1	Teaching and Learning resources	Compliant
5.2	Physical resources	Compliant
5.3	Human support resources	Compliant
5.4	Student support	Compliant

D. Conclusions and final remarks

Please provide constructive conclusions and final remarks which may form the basis upon which improvements of the quality of the programme of study under review may be achieved, with emphasis on the correspondence with the EQF.

After reviewing all the support materials and conducting interviews at the OUC, we find the evaluated programme to be innovative, intensive, interdisciplinary, flexible, well-focused, interesting, and filling a significant gap.

The OUC has extensive experience in distance learning, and the presented programme is well suited for this format. Additionally, since it replaces a very similar programme that was 30 ECTS longer, most of the existing resources, activities, etc., which were already functioning effectively, can be adjusted properly.

The design of the programme and its courses are sound and consistent. The presence of the LEMM is a significant strength, providing teachers with the training and tools to leverage distance-learning opportunities. This contributes to the homogenization of subjects and the ability to innovate by incorporating new tools or ideas into teaching. The LEMM ensures that all processes are online-oriented and helps to exploit the possibilities of eLearning.

We find the teaching staff to be qualitative, skilled, very well prepared and experts in their respective subjects. However, despite this clear strength, the number of permanent academic staff is limited. Actually, there is only one permanent faculty member in this MA programme and he, as well as the rest of the teaching staff have many responsibilities in this program, are active in research and may be involved in other programs offered by the OUC. We believe that increasing the number of permanent teachers would allow them to focus more on research and innovation activities, spend more time with the students and enhance their subjects.

The resources are adequate to support students in their learning. The virtual campus (eClass) and other digital tools used are stable and well-known by both faculty and students. They cover all academic aspects, from the design and implementation of resources (e.g., videos, text documents, simulations, etc.) to evaluation (e.g., proctoring and other fraud detection tools). Additionally, there is a good library that meets the needs of both faculty and students, especially in terms of digital books and other content.

The University demonstrates its commitment to evaluation as a critical aspect, particularly when certifying students' knowledge. We encourage the university to continue evolving its control systems to prevent fraud.

Students and graduates appear to receive excellent service throughout their relationship with the university: the information is clear, additional services are offered, communication within the programme (and externally) is good, and their satisfaction is high. This satisfaction is derived from the fact that students receive ample support from the entire academic, administrative and technical staff of the University.

It should be noted that the students are very positive about the programme, but they still share our concern about the lack of an obligatory MA thesis that would enable them to gain in-depth knowledge about a specific topic and pursue further studies. We advice the MA Programme to re-consider this issue.

In conclusion, the evaluated programme stands out as a robust and forward-thinking initiative that effectively demonstrates the University's extensive experience in distance learning. By maintaining high standards in programme design, resource allocation, and faculty expertise, the University ensures a comprehensive, enriching, welcoming educational experience for its students. The commitment to continuous improvement in the quality of education as well as in fraud prevention and the integration of innovative teaching tools, further underscores the program's dedication to excellence. Overall, the programme meets expectations, providing students with the necessary support and resources to succeed in their academic pursuits.

E. Signatures of the EEC

Name	Signature
Konstantina Botsiou	
Bert van den Brink	
Daniel Riera Terrén	
Maria Diplarou	
Click to enter Name	
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Date: 17/9/2024