

Doc. 300.1.1/2

Date: Date.

External Evaluation Report (E-learning programme of study)

- **Higher Education Institution:**
Open University of Cyprus
- **Town:** Nicosia
- **School/Faculty (if applicable):** Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences
- **Department/ Sector:** Department/Sector
- **Programme of study- Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)**

In Greek:

Μεταπτυχιακό Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών (Master of Science) «ΔΙΑΧΕΙΡΙΣΗ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΣΤΑΣΙΑ ΠΕΡΙΒΑΛΛΟΝΤΟΣ»

In English:

MSc Environmental Conservation and Management
(120 ECTS)

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



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

A. Introduction

This part includes basic information regarding the onsite visit.

The five person External Evaluation Committee (EEC - see next page) undertook the online visit as scheduled on 17. March between 10.00 and 16.30 as planned. Although a few of the early sessions ran a bit longer than intended, the overall schedule worked out well, and allowed the EEC to talk to and question all envisaged without restraints.

The online connections all went via Zoom and were coordinated smoothly by Lefkios Neophytou of CYQAA, and we did not experience any technical issues. Next to Lefkios, Erato Ioanna Sarri of the OUC's Quality Assurance Office was present in most sessions (except with alumni/students).

We got an overview of the whole university in the presence of the rector, then of the faculty by the dean, and of the Programme by the two responsible core faculty members. Meetings with four adjunct faculty members, three alumni (the current student could not make it at a short notice) and a group of relevant support unit staff members followed. The last one including a few short demonstrations. A final session with remaining questions for the two core faculty members completed the visit.

The EEC felt a positive and open atmosphere with those we talked to, and we appreciate their time and input to help us further understand the Programme and its wider setting.

(The detailed schedule with all names of people met has been prepared by and is available within the CYQAA.)

B. External Evaluation Committee (EEC)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>University</i>
Jaap Zevenbergen	Professor, Chair	University of Twente, the Netherlands
Arild Angelsen	Professor, Member	Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway
Isidoro Fasolino	Professor, Member	University of Salerno, Italy
Olaf Zawacki-Richter	Professor, DL Expert	University of Oldenburg, Germany
Konstantia Melekki	Student Member	University of Cyprus, Cyprus

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

1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review

Standards

- *The programme of study:*
 - *is designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes*
 - *is designed by involving students and other stakeholders*
 - *benefits from external expertise*
 - *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)*
 - *is designed so that it enables smooth student progression*
 - *is designed so that the exams' and assignments' content corresponds to the level of the programme and the number of ECTS*
 - *defines the expected student workload in ECTS*
 - *includes well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate*
 - *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.

The Open University of Cyprus has been accepting students since 2006 and considered that they have been on a steep learning curve ever since. A lot of regulations and policies have been put in place over the years, and more will take effect in September 2021 (e.g. mandatory training of (adjunct) faculty members on Distance Learning). With 3 faculties and only 26 faculty members (similar to the number of programmes), the teaching relies heavily on the use of adjunct professors/tutors from outside OUC. Within the limits of the appropriate labour laws and based on the years' long experience, a policy has been found to ensure as much continuity in the programmes as possible while working with part time and short termed (3 years) faculty members.

This does place a very high responsibility for the quality and up-to-dateness of the programmes with the core faculty members, who also need to comply with all the formal and administrative roles and procedures. University-wide support via the Office of Quality Assurance exists, and there is also a University-wide Internal Quality Committee. This committee also exists at the Faculty level, and has one student member. The body closest to the programme is the Internal Evaluation Group of the Programme. This one has no student representation (with so many non-Cypriot students there is no student union in place). Students do contribute to the quality assurance process via the anonymous, online end of module evaluations, which focus on all elements of the programme (incl. workload), as well as the experience with the adjunct faculty members and the administrative support staff and systems.

The MSc in "Environmental Conversation and Management" has been running for a decade with year-long courses and a total of 100 ECTS, including the Master thesis. For a number of reasons, a change to a semester structure with 120 ECTS has been prepared, and is the Programme evaluated by this EEC.

The Learning outcomes have been clearly spelt out, clustered according to the Bloom taxonomy, both at the level of each (10 ECTS) course and for the whole Programme. All courses follow the same grading schedule: 60% based on a written exam and 40% based on (two) exercises.

Information for (prospective) students is well provided via the online presence (internet and eClass). Direct (personal) intake talks are also often applied when people show an interest in the Programme. Only simple management information was presented (and maintained), showing the number of students that started each year, and the number that dropped out each year. Gender was not specified, and when asked currently the female students outweigh the males ones around 2 to 1. Dropout seems low for a Distance Learning programme, likely both the formal support system and informal interactions with students contribute to this. Nearly all dropouts relate to the life situation of the mainly already working students. No numbers linking this to e.g. type of Bachelor or type of employer seem to be kept. A lot of experience based knowledge in the heads of the two core faculty members exists and is used (most likely often implicitly) in regularly refinement and the current large redevelopment of the Programme.

Strengths

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

A specific programme serving a clear niche has been running for over a decade and is now being further improved. Within the staffing constraints it has been a commendable accomplishment.

The dropout rate has been kept quite low for a DL programme, even more so when taking into account the diverse intake in terms of Bachelor's and professional (workplace) backgrounds, and the fact that 90% do the Master's Programme while having already holding a job.

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.

Although students give input into the Quality Assurance system by evaluating each course and the broader setting, their role in analysing this data and recommending improvements based on them seems quite limited, with only a student member at the Faculty level committee. Even if a formal student union is not possible, student representation in the process at Programme level is recommended. A first step would be to introduce a student representative role; a person who works as a moderator between faculty and students and is selected by her/his cohort.

The 3 pages of Intended learning outcomes at Programme level feel a bit like a compilation of those per course; however in the PPT presentation a more summarized version was given; use such higher level one more often for the Programme as a whole, next to the detailed ones for courses (where even more specifically could be indicated which concepts, frameworks, models or tools the student should master after completing the course).

There were no exact statistics given as to the diversity of backgrounds of those that enrol in the program, therefore a tracking of future students could potentially benefit the future decision making process of the program.

The Programme may want to consider introducing elective courses (instead of two pre-cooked specialisations), e.g., from other programmes or faculty members in other faculties. Examples of relevant courses are environmental economics and environmental law.

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

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
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)

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**

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.

The Open University of Cyprus is a fully distance teaching university. The MSc in "Environmental Conversation and Management" has been offered in a distance learning (DL) mode since the academic year 2011-2012. All modules in the programme are offered online via virtual learning and teaching environment eClass without any mandatory face-to-face sessions (except the final examinations that the students take in designated examination centres in Cyprus and Greece where physical presence was required prior to the Covid-19 pandemic).

The virtual learning environment (eClass) integrates various tools to present information and course content, to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous interaction and communication (Blackboard Collaborate, Moodle), to

create video content (lecture capture), to support student assessment and to offer all kinds of administrative student support and counselling services.

According to the guidelines of the CYQAA, the number of students in each class shall not exceed 30 in order to facilitate personal student support and communication between students and instructors as well as among students. Faculty members and tutors are expected to respond to students' questions and postings within 48 hours, and reportedly do some often with 3-4 hours.

Asynchronous as well as synchronous communication is used throughout the courses. Faculty members reported that they try to establish a learning community where the students can bring in their professional experience and background.)

As most of the students in the Programme already are employed and work next to their study (often in jobs linked to the focus of the Programme), the Programme clearly combines an academic and industrial/professional focus. The many (online) exercises contribute to not only gaining theoretical knowledge, but also getting to know and work with tools to address environmental challenges in practice. Laboratory exercises are part of all courses. They are offered by means of virtual labs / applications during scheduled meetings. All laboratory exercises are also recorded and available to the students throughout the semester. For example, an award-winning multimedia application on Biological Conservation and Management of Terrestrial Ecosystems simulates a natural landscape using elements of gamification. For none of these practical training in the traditional sense is mandatory, although sometimes voluntary field visits (being filmed for those who cannot join) or life lab visits in at least Cyprus and Greece are organized (pre Covid).

Finding the balance between an academic focus with an emphasis on research methodology and an industrial focus with an emphasis on practical tools is a continuous process and comes back regularly in meetings on refinements in the Programme. The alumni spoken also represented both sides and also see the issue, but overall they were satisfied with the way the balance is struck.

Each course is completed with a final exam that the students have to take (physically under non-Covid circumstances) at examination centers in Cyprus and Greece. The result counts 60 % towards the final grade, 40 % are graded based on learning activities (assignments, online participation, study groups, quizzes) during the online courses. Individual feedback on the submitted work is provided to allow students to learn from their mistakes (formative assessment).

The eClass platform also provides a plagiarism detection service and an online examination proctoring software as the final examination has been also moved to fully online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The course modules have a weekly schedule in Moodle that includes all relevant information: a study guide with goals and objectives, intended learning outcomes, a bibliography, video lectures and laboratory exercises, supplemental resources, and self-assessment exercises and activities, and self-evaluation exercises.

Feedback is provided on a regular basis during the courses using the communication tools in Moodle as well as self-study questions and quizzes that are automatically graded for immediate feedback.

Instructors offer a weekly synchronous tutorial that is not mandatory and recorded so that students who could not participate can watch the video recording later. Faculty members encourage students to post course related questions also in the asynchronous forums so that all students benefit from the discussion. However, the conferences on eClass are not heavily used, probably because most questions are sorted out during the synchronous tutorial sessions.

Strengths

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

Learning activities and exercises are designed to promote collaboration among students in which they apply their knowledge to solve complex problems. A variety of digital tools are used to support collaborative online learning. Using weekly topics and assignments in the courses is a good practice in the context of distance learning.

The size of the classes is limited to 30 students per section, which allows the instructors to work in close contact with the students providing the guidance and the encouragement needed especially in distance learning settings.

The award-winning multimedia application on Biological Conversation and Management of Terrestrial Ecosystems simulates a natural landscape using elements of gamification, developed with the Educational Technology Research Lab.

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.

Synchronous lectures should be offered not too often in order to place more emphasis on asynchronous delivery (e.g. asynchronous discussions in Moodle or (professionally) recorded video-lectures) to provide flexible learning opportunities independent of time and space.

Even when not mandatory, the offering of ‘presence activities’ needs to be well organized to avoid a divide between those who did and those that could not join them (e.g. filming during field visits helps, and also occasional options offered outside Cyprus alone).

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

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
2.1	Process of teaching and learning and student-centred 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 Programme has a very small teaching staff base, with just two permanent faculty members, one full professor and one assoc. professor. Each of them is responsible for one of the two specializations within the Programme, and teach courses and supervise the Master theses. In addition, there are four adjunct faculty members, which teach one or some two courses. This compares with 7 permanent faculty members (4 prof, 3 assoc. prof) and 40-50 adjunct professors within the Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences as a whole, and 26 permanent faculty members and ca. 260 adjunct faculty members at OUC. As such the temporary/permanent ratio of 2 within the Programme is favourable compared to a ratio of ca. 10 at the university level.

The Programme currently has 137 active students. There are obviously large economics of scale in Internet-based teaching, but 1:1 interactions are also required, in particular for the Master thesis. (In addition, seven external supervisors drawn from the list of applications for the adjunct faculty members have been utilized in the period 2017-19).

The adjunct faculty members are recruited based on an annual, open call, and based on well-defined appointment criteria. In practice, however, these teachers have stayed with the Programme for several years, and are hired for three years at the time. At the university level, in 90% of the cases the teachers are appointed for another three years.

Courses and instructors are evaluated annually by the students and the relevant university committees, and in a few cases (at the university level) contracts have been terminated. The renewal of contract is thus based on thorough

examinations, and much more so than at an average, campus-based university. According to the rector, the university is in general very satisfied with the quality of the candidates for these positions.

In practice, the adjunct faculty members are more to be regarded part time workers that stay with the Programme and the university for long periods of time. Occasionally they are also involved in the research activities of the university.

Faculty members receive training in distant learning methods, and are also being supported by the Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology (LEMM). In addition, there is an educational Technology Research Lab, which helps to develop distance learning tools, such as simulation 'games'.

All faculty members have relevant education, are active researchers and are also involved in practical or policy applications, and thus have a relevant background for their teaching.

In general, having more temporary/adjunct faculty members than permanent faculty members is far from ideal for programme development, coherence across courses, quality assurance and continuity. Yet, the impression we get is that the adjunct faculty members are well integrated into the Programme, for example, by also being involved in Master thesis supervision. One of the four teaches two courses.

The two permanent faculty members are very active researchers, with a combined output of ca. 20 journal articles per year. They each also run a research lab: *Laboratory of Chemical Engineering and Engineering Sustainability* (Antonis Zorpas) and *Terrestrial Ecosystem Management Lab* (Ioannis Vogiatzakis). The four adjunct faculty members are also involved in research and publish regularly, although not with the same high outputs.

The faculty (which has 7 permanent academic faculty members) is active in 19 EU and national projects (>10 being EU projects). This is very high, in particular considering the rather heavy teaching and supervision responsibilities they also have. Some adjunct faculty members are involved in research at the faculty, although most are not due to time constraints (and their principal responsibility is the teaching of the appointed courses), although most of them do so at their other place of employment.

The two specializations of the Programme reflect the professional background and research interests of the two faculty members, and their own research papers or activities are frequently used in the courses. As such, the Programme seems to have achieved a strong link between the content of the courses and the research interests and activities of the instructors.

Strengths

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

A well-qualified group of teachers, with a good combination of relevant background, being active researchers, and having relevant applied experience.

Examples from own research are being used in the courses.

The students who met the EEC were very positive about their learning experiences, both for professional application and for knowledge and progression to doctoral study and research publications and presentation at international conferences.

The EEC, therefore, is positively impressed with the student perceptions of the quality of teaching-research interactions.

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.

With so much of the Programme resting on the two core faculty members, opportunities to groom one or more potential successors for the future should be actively sought, e.g. by supporting research by one or more of the adjunct faculty members, either in their own or linked to ongoing projects.

Although a few students have managed to publish their MSc thesis results as papers, the programme should create opportunities to involve more of them in ongoing research projects (although it may be hard for those having a full-time job already).

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

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

Issues on student admission, progression, recognition and certification are in general covered by the OUC Internal Regulations for Studies, covering Requirements and Enrolment for Graduate Programmes at Master's level; Admission procedure; Recognition of Modules or Thematic Units; ECTS and Student workload; and Titles Awarded.

Information provided in the programme documentation and during meeting provided evidence that standards are substantially met. Available information about admissions processes and criteria, and discussion with the programme team and administrative staff indicated that policies are applied appropriately.

In particular, admissions criteria for a programme of this kind allow some flexibility so that the programme can be accessed by students from a wide range of backgrounds. Direct (personal) intake talks are also often applied when people show an interest in the Programme to verify their fit and chance of success; the job they already have in most cases also plays an important role here. The relatively low dropout rate shows this is not an issue.

Discussion with faculty members and administrative staff reassured the EEC that a clear policy on student progression is in place, and that (simple) information on this is monitored. Both staff and students know where to find relevant information, although not all possibilities of learning analytics that Elearning platforms normally offer are currently being used. A discussion on this at university level has been initiated.

It is difficult, only from the documents provided and the discussion to judge whether processes for student recognition and certification are fully implemented, but the EEC was satisfied that processes and regulations are in place that should ensure that standards are met. Alumni spoken to did not mention any issues on this, and even mentioned someone taking a period as an exchange student abroad.

Strengths

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

The admissions process appears to be flexible and takes into account special student interests and aspiration. The students the EEC met were very positive about their experience (contents of course, assignments, feedback) and the collaborative learning environment.

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.

It would be useful to direct future some efforts to better define specific regulations along the path from admission and certification. For example, one may assess the prior learning in admission, to suggest possibly preparation / education debts. Further, the course could consider the possibility to recognise a small number of ECTS for extra-curricular or non-formal / informal activities.

There is scope for improvements of the performance data about the course, e.g. on students' background an how that relates to pass rate or successful or drop out. The programme did not present any information system to automatically monitor student performance, while the indications provided during the interviews to supervise the learning process in general seem to be available and used as tacit knowledge by the two core faculty members.

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

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
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 Environmental Conservation and Management (MSc) programme is supported by adequate learning, innovative applications and human resources. Students are satisfied with the online platforms utilised for distance learning (e-Class platform). Faculty members and support staff are equally satisfied with the resources available and they are highly motivated and committed to provide the best possible learning experience for the students. There are support mechanisms put in place for the wellbeing of the students, in the form of a psychologist, group support sessions and one on one meetings. Special services for students with disabilities or health issues are also in place. Given the online nature of the programme the use of electronic resources and online communication has helped run the programme during the pandemic and cater for the needs of students with special needs.

Physical resources are not relevant since this is a university dedicated on distance learning. The resources therefore are appropriate for the nature of the course in distance learning delivery and the particular programme of study.. The tools and services provided by the virtual learning platform eClass (see section 2.1) are appropriate to operate and manage a fully online degree program. The system permits interactive activities and formative assessment in accordance with state-of-the-art technological advances and own research activities.

As mentioned above in section 2.4, a great variety of educational media and learning materials is used in the course modules. Faculty members are supported in the course and learning material development process by a central service unit, the Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab (LEMM) that was established only two years ago. With only three staff members at the LEMM, who have to provide services for the entire university, the resources are very limited. That being said, the staff members are well qualified to carry out their services, and the faculty members reported that they are very satisfied with the support they receive from the LEMM.

Open Educational Resources (OER) are not widely used in the School of Pure and Applied Sciences.

Only the final exams are place in a physical location.

One faculty member or tutor is responsible for supporting one cohort or class section of students with a maximum number of 30 participants which is appropriate to facilitate an interactive and personal relationship between the instructors and students as well as among the students.

The students enrolled in the programme represent a typical student profile of an open and distance teaching university: 90 % of the students in the programme are currently employed who can bring in their professional experience. The drop-out rate is relatively low for a DL program.

The eClass platform is tracking student's login information that is reported to the instructors, who may promptly get in touch with no-showing students. However, a systematic learning analytics system is currently not implemented.

The LEMM also provides professional development training courses, one course on distance education teaching methodology and another more technical course on how to use the various tools and features of the eClass environment. The courses will be compulsory for new permanent and adjunct faculty members.

The programme organizes international workshop with experts and students from abroad to provide an opportunity for international experiences. Students are encouraged to participate in Erasmus exchanges.

Strengths

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

Students reported that they feel very well supported and are very satisfied with the institutional academic and administrative student support services. The organisational and technical support infrastructure operates in a professional way.

The EEC was satisfied with the preparatory information provided and the meeting with staff with regards to library, internal communication and administrative support for the Programme. The material provided to EEC shows that the resources required by the programme are of a very good standard and should be capable of supporting expected number of students. The university has a clear commitment to meeting the current and future needs of student learners, as indicated by a willingness to recruit new faculty members and expand resources if student numbers increase.

The programme is sensitive as to the wellbeing of its students, offers extensions to students who need it and continuous updating to all online resources. There is a good working relationship among faculty members, administrative staff, and students which contributes to the efficient delivery of the program. Tutors and the staff are friendly, helpful, as students mentioned and are always willing to go the extra mile to provide support to their students and personal virtual or physical meetings. The distance learning aspect makes the offering of the programme amenable to students from Greece and elsewhere, providing corresponding incentives attracting mature students to 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.

There are no serious issues related to the overall DL course development and student support systems. Here are just a few general recommendations:

The Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab (LEMM) has to grow in terms of human and financial resources to provide professional and high quality services in professional development training for faculty members, course development, instructional design and learning material production. The current resources are far too limited.

We strongly support that newly hired faculty members and tutors will need to mandatorily take the professional development training courses offered by LEMM if they do not have this kind of qualification or cannot prove

otherwise that they possess the required skills and experience to teach online at a distance (as planned from September 2021).

A learning analytics system should be implemented to introduce a less organic early warning system to detect students at risk and to offer proactive student support.

Furthermore, it should be considered (especially in times of limited financial resources) to use more open educational resources (OER) and textbooks.

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

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
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.

The core faculty members of the MSc Environmental Conservation and Management have created a very interesting and relevant programme that serves a specific niche, both in Cyprus and Greece, targeted towards people already working in related jobs and who want to further improve their knowledge and skills. A nice mix of academic and professional elements has been found, and especially with the 20 ECTS added in the Programme being reviewed, with very appropriate attention of some of the key climate change challenges (mitigation, adaptation, water issues) in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The core faculty members clearly cover a broad spectrum in their field, and also maintain a good scientific profile with externally funded research projects and a high number of publications. Among them and the four adjunct staff the panel met during the online visit, however, there seems to be some bias towards the more natural science side of environmental management (at least in their original trainings). From the descriptions of the courses, it is clear a much broader perspective is taught, which also aligns to the diversity of first degrees of the students enrolling. With the field as such, and the description of the Programme and its courses, being clearly interdisciplinary, it might be good to also have some of the regular teachers have, for example, an economics background. Though use of diverse materials, guest lectures and seminars, nevertheless, also in the current setting these elements are clearly brought into the mix already. The possibility of including elective course from other programmes at OUC should also be considered. Apparently, some new opportunities have recently emerged, e.g. new hires in environmental economics and environmental law in the other Faculties.

Although we were informed the gender mix among the teaching staff was more balanced a few years ago, of the ones we saw during the online visit only one female among the six academics felt a bit lopsided, in particular as the student population apparently leans the other way. Opportunities to balance this out should be used wherever possible, which we assume to be in line with national and university policy on inclusiveness and gender balance.

With the importance of the Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab (LEMM) for offering high quality and state-of-the-art DL to the whole university, it has to grow in terms of human and financial resources to provide professional and high quality services in professional development training for faculty members, course development, instructional design and learning material production. The current resources are far too limited to do this all, and this is likely to affect the different programmes, incl. the MSc Environmental Conservation and Management.

Realizing the difficulties of engaging DL students beyond the standard end-of-course evaluation in the quality assurance process, we would still encourage to do so in the future. We also did not hear of an organized way of using the experiences of alumni (during and after their time in the Programme) in both fine tuning the Programme, and even 'selling it' to prospective students.

The MSc Environmental Conservation and Management (120 ECTS) serves, in the eyes of the panel (EEC), a clear purpose and is well designed for that, and is embedded in the supportive structure of the OUC (which is already attuned to the job of DL, and furthering itself in it). The success is also clearly based on the more tacit knowledge and experience with the two core staff members. A process to document/formalize much of this should be started, also to avoid the collapse in case one of them would no longer be available.



E. Signatures of the EEC

<i>Name</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Jaap Zevenbergen	
Arild Angelsen	
Isidoro Fasolino	
Olaf Zawacki-Richter	
Konstantia Melekkı	

Date: 23 March 2021