

## Thematic analysis on Master programmes' evaluation

**Report No: 2- April 2019**

**Title: Master programmes' Evaluation: Trends and Dominant Issues**

**Period: September 2017- September 2018**

**Number of programmes: A. Private Institutions, Colleges 11- B. Universities 16 [2 of the Public Universities and 14 of the Private Universities (2 rejected)]**

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### General observations

As it has been evidenced and analysed in the experts' reports, there are significant differences in quality between colleges and universities offering Master programmes, as well as among institutions of the same institutional status. The differences refer mainly to the research environment and the teaching staff.

Although the Master level presupposes research work, colleges which admittedly do not conduct research used to offer Master programmes due to provisions of the laws of their establishment and operation. Following also provisions of the previous law, the majority of teaching personnel did not have the academic profile suitable for teaching in Master programmes because of their lack of a research profile, publications in refereed journals, experience and permanent position. The inadequate number of PhD degree holders and a great number of part-time teaching staff proved to be a threatening trend against teaching and learning quality assurance. The experts' evaluation reports and the Agency's policy made it clear that all Master programmes should be delivered in a research environment.

Moreover, differences occur between universities regarding research premises, external funding for research, the staff's research skills and publications and students' research skills development. Recommendations also concern teaching and learning in Higher Education which must be further developed in order to cultivate critical thinking, research skills and Scenario- and Problem-Based Learning (PBL and SBL).

## **Trends and issues deriving from the experts' recommendations and from the institutions' responses**

### **A. Colleges' Master programmes**

#### **Standard 1. Aims, Expected Learning Outcomes, Content and Quality Assurance Processes**

All the External Evaluation Committees suggested restructuring the programmes. It was obvious that academic supervision for designing and developing the programmes was lacking. Consequently, the absence of coherence and sequence of the courses was observed by the experts, who suggested drastic changes to the content and learning outcomes. They also provided references for updating the content and giving emphasis on the core modules and the relative research findings.

*Institutions' responses have evidenced that they were looking for this kind of support. They adopted all the experts' suggestions and their amendments were sent back to the External Committees who approved the new programmes. The Council of the Agency observed that the quality assurance processes of the institutions were not satisfactory and recommended enrichment of the Internal Quality Assurance Committees with academics and qualified persons in curriculum design and development.*

#### **Standard 2. Teaching and learning/ Standard 3. Teaching staff**

The experts pointed out that a shortage of staff and a lack of experts in the field result in ineffective teaching and deficiencies in mentoring and personal students' support. Furthermore, students' mastery in the field cannot be achieved without academics with a rich academic/research profile. Concerning the already hired personnel, the need for continuous development had been identified.

The enthusiasm of the staff and their commitment towards the successful delivery of the proposed programmes can be pointed out as a general positive trend which may allow their participatory development in external or institutional communities of experts and research oriented personnel.

*Colleges' responses included contracts with new teaching staff with a PhD and experience in the subject area. The enrichment of colleges' teaching staff with qualified academics is a need which has only partially been satisfied.*

#### **Standard 4. Research premises and culture, staff and students' involvement in research**

It is a paradox to provide mastery in the field of the Master programme without teaching staff who run research in the field and are experts in the subject matter of the courses. Inconsistencies between the Master programmes' expected learning outcomes and the quality of teaching and research, areas closely linked to the teaching staff qualifications, have been pointed out in all the programmes. The Committees of Experts provided suggestions for updating teaching, learning and research.

*It is obvious that colleges have not fully realized the gravity of the problem, since they respond by establishing “Centers of research” with limited internal funding without hiring staff with research expertise. They follow the recommendations for Erasmus exchanges, but they still need to proceed to fundamental restructuring of the hiring and promoting staff system.*

#### **Standard 5. Resources, student welfare services, administrative services, laboratories, library**

The enrichment of the libraries is a continuous recommendation of the experts. It has also been evidenced in the experts’ reports that effective mentoring is not provided because of the aforementioned deficiencies concerning the teaching staff and the lack of research.

Research premises are lacking and students do not cultivate research skills.

**The institutions responded positively and started organising their administrative services and updating their resources according to the experts’ suggestions for each evaluated programme.**

### **A. Experts’ recommendations for Colleges’ Masters**

#### **Standard 1: Programme’s profile, learning outcomes, content and methodology**

I. Programme design. Academic oversight of the programme design is lacking. Those who are responsible for ensuring that the content of the programme is adequate are not sufficiently experienced/knowledgeable to do so. We therefore strongly recommend that the institution seek out experienced and knowledgeable individuals who will provide oversight of the program design for resubmission to this accreditation body. Although the resubmission must address all points that we have asserted in this document, we emphasize the following:

II. Learning outcomes and programme goals must be revised; these need to be aligned to the course content.

III. All courses are very broad and attempt to cover many areas. There is a danger that some topics will not be covered in sufficient depth to give students an advanced understanding. This could be addressed by providing focused electives, perhaps of size 5 ECTS.

IV. Course content needs to be redesigned to avoid redundancy across modules and ensure that all core areas are sufficiently covered, in addition to current strategic thinking, which is noticeably absent from the module content areas.

V. Revise which modules are compulsory versus elective; make decisions based on programme goals and learning outcomes. For instance, we recommend including X as a core module; if the programme goals include ethics, then ethics must be a core module or clearly embedded into each module.

VI. The syllabi should contain updated references from the field's books and journals. The Committee will be happy to provide some suggested references if required.

VII. Care should be taken to minimise the overlap between courses. For example, the mandatory course 404 overlaps strongly with some other courses. We suggest that the content of this course is reconsidered. Consideration should be given to introducing some more foundational material in the programme, for instance from statistics.

VIII. It may be a good idea to consider revising hand-in dates in order to minimise, if not eliminate, cross-over between starting a new module and students continuing to work on an existing module.

IX. The programme should be more explicitly aligned with contextual and policy issues in Cyprus.

X. The 10 ECTS course structure with relatively low contact hours should be addressed by increasing the number of contact hours per week by at least one hour. Currently, the number of contact hours is 3 per week, which is too little for such broad courses, with large content coverage.

XI. All courses are very broad and attempt to cover many areas. There is a danger that some topics will not be covered in sufficient depth to give students an advanced understanding. This could be addressed by providing focused electives, perhaps of size 5 ECTS.

## **Standard 2. Teaching and learning**

I. Plans should be in place for ensuring quality teaching in light of the expected mixed backgrounds of students admitted to the programme. This issue can be handled with the initial intake of <10 students, but will become more difficult when the number of students on the programme grows.

II. Programme delivery. Based on the evidence that we have been provided, the delivery team is unable to deliver the materials that are needed so that students are able to demonstrate mastery in the field. This is because no full-time academic staff have recognised/accredited PhDs in the subject area, and none, to our knowledge, have significant work experience in the field.

III. At the very least, teaching staff should be assigned an external faculty member as a touch-point to assist with discipline-specific issues and teaching activities.

## **Standard 3. Teaching staff**

I. Participation in the Erasmus programmes will be very positive for students and staff.

II. We were impressed by the enthusiasm of the staff, the collegial culture, and their commitment towards the successful delivery of the proposed programme.

III. The leadership team and staff of the programme possess the necessary academic expertise and practical experience to successfully deliver the proposed programme.

IV. There is a shortage of personnel in data science which must be addressed. Consequently, there is an imbalance between simulation science and data science in the programme. We expect that this will be rectified, given the hiring plans that are in place.

V. Core courses should be taught by faculty members whose orientations and expertise are in the field.

VI. Visiting professors will contribute to the cultivation of research culture.

VII. More staff with a Ph.D. degree and experience should be appointed and that will improve the academic content of the programme.

VIII. There is a need for further continuous staff development to ensure that teaching staff are up-to-date with the latest developments and practice in teaching methods and in the subject area.

IX. The staff must have the academic qualifications and experience in the field.

**Standard 4. Research premises, staff and students' involvement in research, publications**

I. The research culture in the institution should be improved and appropriate mentoring should be available to junior staff by appropriately qualified and experienced researchers.

II. In short, the Committee felt that the programme is of satisfactory standard, but also identified areas for improvement:

1) A more consistent approach to research-led education. This could be achieved through:

a. A reward system that relieves research-active staff (with strong evidence of quality research or potential) from an excessive teaching load.

b. An assessment mechanism for the evaluation of the quality of research outputs. Specifically, we recommend a clear distinction between journals with impact-factor and/or journals included in the ABS (UK Association of Business Schools) list versus journals without evidence of academic quality.

c. The development of research collaborations with academics working in foreign institutions (this could also help strengthen the international dimension).

2) A stronger internalisation emphasis. This could be achieved through:

a. visiting professors from foreign universities (see also 1c)

b. the development of links with foreign businesses for students wishing to pursue a career abroad post-graduation (albeit this may be not fully applicable in an MA programme with full-time working students)

III. The setting up of an external academic advisory committee would be beneficial for the improvement of teaching and learning, and the cultivation of research culture

IV. There is a need to build research in areas that can influence and inform the programme of study scrutinised here, with more explicit examples of research and industrial practice. This should inform and support the curriculum, ideally with direct student involvement where possible.

V. Currently there isn't a research methods module for students. A compulsory research methods course should be introduced.

VI. The panel suggests developing a research strategy and putting in place transparent criteria for the allocation of the funding (e.g. project novelty, industrial support and researcher's qualifications).

#### **Standard 5. Resources, student welfare services, administrative services, laboratories, library**

I. The library should be located in a larger room to enable the purchase of more books in education, in general, and in the field of the programme, in particular, both in Greek and English.

II. The students enjoy satisfactory levels of welfare; and, the administrative staff is very supportive and efficient.

III. Mentoring with personal tutors is needed to monitor each student's performance and provide mentoring/support services.

## **B. Universities' Master programmes**

### **Trends and issues deriving from the experts' recommendations and from the institutions' responses**

*The following experts' comments on a specific programme could highlight the point of reference against which things may be compared (benchmarked):*

*"In summary, the proposed programme will make an outstanding addition to the educational landscape in Cyprus and internationally. The academic team is excellent, the programme of studies is well-developed and the provisions for attracting and supporting students are all in place. Suggestions for minor improvements and topics to consider at a later stage are provided under the detailed comments below. The overall vision of the research center, as well as the positioning of the center in the national and international research and education landscape, is impressive."*

### **Standard 1. Aims, Expected Learning Outcomes, Content and Quality Assurance Processes**

Revisions of the majority of the programmes were necessary, focusing mainly on the addition of courses and the inclusion of new topics. The External Evaluation Committees pointed out the need for upgrading the courses' objectives and the learning outcomes in order to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Moreover suggestions for enhancing the research orientation of the programmes have been made.

*Institutions' responses have evidenced compliance with the experts' recommendations. In order to promote the international competitiveness of the Cyprus higher education system, it is necessary to internationalize the view and processes of developing an academic programme.*

### **Standard 2. Teaching and learning**

Teaching in higher education needs improvement and the organisation and participation in relative seminars has been considered necessary for better teaching and learning. Experts' invitations by each institution for seminars are also proposed, with the aim of contributing to both the staff's teaching skills and to students' higher-order thinking.

*Universities must undertake the responsibility for training their staff in teaching in higher education, decrease the hours of lecturing and promote critical thinking and problem based teaching. The establishment of Centers of Teaching and Learning is necessary, since they will give the opportunity for on-going in-service training with the contributions of external experts.*

### **Standard 3. Teaching staff**

The number of the permanent teaching staff must be increased and the teaching skills of the existing staff should be upgraded. Non-permanent Special Scientific Personnel (SSP) is being employed by a number of universities for teaching in Master' programmes. The panel of experts stressed the necessity for SSP to be trained in teaching in higher education.

*Contracts with new teaching staff for delivering the new programmes were included in the institutions responses. In order to raise the academic profile of the private institutions the processes for hiring and promotion of new staff must become more competitive. Establishment of rewards for excellent teaching (i.e., grants for research in education, funding to attend professional development courses) could motivate the teaching staff.*

### **Standard 4. Research premises, staff and students' involvement in research, publications**

There is room for large scale improvement in research and research premises, as well as in staff and students' involvement in research. Links also of research to the content and teaching of the programmes is evidenced in the experts' reports. Research publications of the staff are not always appropriate for a Master programme, a fact that limits students' research skills development.

*Research oriented programmes, staff's and students' research skills must be enhanced.*

*Synergies of research and teaching are not often evidenced, impeding students mastering the research developments in the field. The Institutions' responses focused on changes from teaching the content towards research based inquiries.*

**Standard 5. Resources, student welfare services, administrative services, laboratories, library**

Resources and services satisfy the basic requirements.

**B. Experts' recommendations for the Universities' Master Programmes (Conventional/face-to-face)**

**Standard 1: Programme's profile, learning outcomes, content and methodology**

- I. The External Evaluation Committees recommend additional courses.
- II. The syllabus was not detailed enough and the learning objectives should be more detailed. The training schedule and components are well designed and balanced.
- III. Overall, the structure and delivery of the programme are as described in the programme specifications. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) seems to be applied in an appropriate and consistent manner. Also, the programme of study is structured consistently. The EEC believes that the learning objectives and outcomes should be redrafted so as to be more detailed and specific.
- IV. The quality assurance and management of the programme seem to be appropriate. With respect to the international dimension of the programme, it is beneficial that the following topics will represent an extra module of the programme.
- V. Some recommendations and suggestions for the improvement of the course:
  - The intention to focus mainly on research within the programme of study contradicts the need for vocational and applied practice focus of the proposed degree.
  - There is a clear need to add related contents to the elective modules in relation to the assessed and treated individual.
- VI. It will appear from what has been said above that the proposal provides broadly adequate information (despite certain inconsistencies and omissions). But as a result of looking at the proposal and our discussions at the site meeting, we did have a number of concerns that, while not rendering the programme unviable, seem to us to need addressing.
- VII. More specific admission criteria are needed. There is a lack of clarity about the target group of pupils. The inclusion of both pupils with (general) learning difficulties and those with (specific) learning difficulties resulted in some lack of clarity about whose needs were actually being addressed. The two groups have different profiles of performance, of strengths and needs. Subsequently the education of these two groups of pupils has quite

distinct approaches to assessment and intervention. The proposed programme(s) did not provide evidence of fully preparing students to intervene practically with these two groups.

VIII. The programme is well-structured and there are synergies between and among the modules and the overall aims and objectives of the programme. The learning outcomes are appropriate. The programme satisfies the policies and conditions of the Cyprus Agency for Quality Assurance, as well as the University's educational and internationalisation policies.

IX. The synergies between theory and practice and between academia and profession should be identified and spelled out.

X. The number of offered courses and their compulsory and/or elective character may need to be reviewed.

XI. The multidisciplinary nature of the programme should inform, where appropriate, the modules and, in particular, the research methods.

XII. The Committee recommends the following minor changes and inclusion of specific topics.

XIII. The programme and individual course learning outcomes should continue to be revised to better reflect Master's level (for example, greater emphasis on critical analysis, synthesis, discussion and debate).

XIV. The advertised student qualifications for entry are appropriate, but the EEC would recommend that the programme could potentially be widened to include relevant professionals with a Bachelors Degree.

XI. The proposed MSc programme title, structure and content must be revised according to the recommendations provided above.

XII. Advanced level must be defined in terms of Master programme expected learning outcomes.

XIII. The research project credits are not adequate to standard MSc programmes. We recommend increasing the credit to 15 ECTS and aligning it with other programmes.

## **Standard 2. Teaching and learning**

I. The programme's coordinator should set up policies in place to use the evaluation results of the students for improving the quality of teaching. Moreover, the teaching days/hours should be selected in a way so as to facilitate the participation of students that are employed.

II. The modern way of teaching is to decrease the hours of lecturing in favor of problem-based discussions and case-study scenarios.

III. The teaching material needs improvement.

IV. A seminar programme with contributions from expert, well-respected, external speakers should be considered to help the development of the students' higher level of critical thinking; make the programme attractive to new recruits; and raise the profile and reputation of the Department.

V. The teaching team needs to ensure timely feedback to students on top of self-assessment.

VI. The teaching team needs to provide consistent criteria for marking (e.g. penalties when word limits are exceeded).

VII. The panel encourages appointment of one of the full-time teaching staff members per semester to oversee quality and support the special scientists in their academic teaching.

### **Standard 3. Teaching staff**

I. Heavy workload for the teaching staff and the need to improve the research environment.

II. The number of full-time personnel must be increased.

III. The EEC highly recommends, in addition to their own faculty, engaging external collaborators from other institutions to participate in order to cover specific topics and the continuing education on pedagogical teaching methods for them. There currently seems to be a shortage of personnel. The EEC concluded that the qualifications of the current teaching staff are satisfactory.

IV. The proposed Programme Coordinator must be a full time member of the academic staff of the university and preferably a PhD holder.

### **Standard 4. Research premises, staff and students' involvement in research, publications**

I. Regarding research work and synergies with teaching, the theoretical background of the course is excellent.

II. There is a need for specialisation in research.

III. The learning outcomes of the MSc programme and individual courses should more explicitly link research and clinical practice and, where possible, be aligned with the staff's areas of research and expertise.

V. In particular, the university should focus, in the short term, on the research skills training the students receive and, in the long term, on the research opportunities for the teaching staff as a whole.

VI. To optimise expertise in grant and funding acquisition, successful grant-getters should be encouraged to mentor the less successful, to pass on their skills and avoid the corrosive 'competitive' culture which can emerge when external funding is being sought. That said, budgets within the university should build in some regular provision for research equipment, renewable resources (e.g. copyright test forms), software, and conference attendance. The

university should also provide administrative support for grant applications and management and make the necessary workload allowances.

VII. Support the course with more laboratory teaching and research resources that have the potential to also improve academics' research portfolio quality.

VIII. We have concerns about the extent to which the taught programme is based on current/recent evidence based practice. Masters students should graduate at the forefront of developments in the field, knowledgeable about debates and controversies and with the tools to critique approaches without an adequate evidence base.

**Standard 5. Resources, student welfare services, administrative services, laboratories, library**

I. The number of scientific books must be increased.

II. The library services and the loan system must be upgraded.

ANNEX 1:

Codes and patterns for MASTER PROGRAMMES (Conventional-face-to-face)

STANDARD	SUB-CATEGORIES	OBSERVATIONS	11 COLLEGES/frequency	14 UNIVERSITIES/frequency
1.	Aims, Expected Learning	Discrepancies	11/100%	5/36%
	Content	Lack of sequence/ Coherence	11/100%	6/43%

		Non-research oriented	11/100%	7/50%
	Quality Assurance Processes	Ineffectiveness	8/73%	6/43%
2.	Teaching and Learning	Non -research led	11/100%	8/57%
		Inadequate for Higher Education	9/82%	8/57%
		Improvement of teaching material	7/64%	3/21%
3.	Teaching staff	Non- Academic profile	8/73%	
		Shortage		5/36%
		Lack of Expertise in the field	9/82%	5/36%
4.	Research	Missing Teachers' involvement	10/91%	4/29%
		Missing Students' involvement	10/91%	8/57%
		Lack of Research publications	9/82%	6/43%
5.	Resources			
		Improvement - Student welfare services	2/18%	
		Inadequate Administrative services	1/9%	
		Improvement of laboratories	6/55%	
		Enrichment of books	8/73%	5/36%
		Updating library services	6/55%	2/14%