

Thematic analysis on Master programmes' evaluation

Report No 3: - June 2019

Title: E-learning programmes' evaluation: Trends and Dominant Issues

Period: January 2016- January 2019

NUMBER OF PROGRAMMES

YEAR	No of Master Programmes
2016	3 (1 rejected)
2017	15 (3 rejected)
2018	7 (2 rejected)
2019	1
TOTAL	26 (6 rejected, 23%)

General observations

E-Learning programmes are increasing from year to year among the five private universities, which offer both face-to-face and e-learning programmes. At the moment, the two public universities do not offer e-learning programmes. The Cyprus Open University is a public university which exclusively offers distance education and e-learning programmes.

It is necessary to note a positive trend, which refers to the year-to-year improvement of the structure of the programmes, their pedagogical support, infrastructure and delivery, a trend that indicates the effect of the experts' recommendations.

Experts' reports pointed out the problems arising from the practice employed at the beginning of e-learning delivery to transform the conventional programmes to e-learning without the necessary pedagogical knowledge that distinguishes e-learning from independent study or from face-to-face teaching. As one experts' review stated in 2017: *"The Evaluation Committee found as problematic the lack of fidelity to the philosophical foundations of distance learning; simply placing conventional learning materials on blackboard does not constitute good distance educational practice. The latter requires considerable investment in time and resources."*

The gradual improvement of the programmes is obvious in the latest comments, in 2019, on an e-learning programme of the same university to which the aforementioned extract refers:

“This is a well-designed and accomplished DL MSc programme with clear aims that cover all expected scientific aspects and learning objectives. The presentation of the programme to the EEC was very clear and the information that will be provided to future students and the course material are meticulously prepared with remarkable attention to detail.”

Moreover, before the establishment of the CYQAA, e-learning programmes used to be delivered without permanent/experienced staff, a fact that did not safeguard the quality of teaching. In combination with loose students’ admission criteria that were non-specific or ill-defined for each programme, learning seemed a difficult achievement for students who needed continuous guidance and support. The following extract of the experts’ report portrays the situation:

“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, these two groups of pupils need quite distinct approaches to assessment and intervention. The proposed programme(s) did not provide evidence of fully preparing students and intervening practically regarding these two groups.”

Recommendations also concern the level of assignments which in a number of cases did not reflect the Master’s level, a recommendation which had also been made for the conventional Master’s programmes. This issue is closely linked with deficiencies in research for both teaching staff and students, and consequently with teaching and research synergies. The main reason for the rejection of e-learning programmes is the lack of an institution’s, programme’s and staff’s research profile.

Trends and issues deriving from the experts’ recommendations and from the institutions’ responses

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

The trend of universities to transform the conventional programmes to e-learning or/and to offer both is due to the willingness to attract students from abroad and especially from Greece, because of the common language. The question which arises is the readiness of the universities to understand the philosophy and aims of e-learning and their ability to develop and deliver qualitative distance learning programmes. The experts’ reports in 2016 and at the beginning of 2017 pointed out a number of serious weaknesses regarding the structure of the programmes and the institutions’ ability to support students’ learning. Pre-sessional courses were proposed in a number of cases for the adequate preparation of students before they attended the programme.

Institutions were adaptable to the proposed new conditions and adjusted the programmes to the e-learning standards as analysed in the experts' reports and in the Agency's policy announcements. Change was not easy since, before the establishment of the CYQAA, e-learning programmes used to be offered without concrete standards and guidelines. Discussion with experts and the Agency' reporting, in case of rejection and second evaluation, contributed to understanding the philosophy of the e-learning programmes' development.

Standard 2. Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in e-learning education heavily relies on productive and continuous students' interaction with the appropriate weekly proposed teaching material and learning sources, the interaction of students with other students and their work and students' continuous interaction with the instructor, who assesses and provides feedback to students on their work. This situation presupposes small groups of students per instructor, specialisation in the field, and online and face-to-face synchronous and asynchronous communication. These presuppositions were mostly lacking from the very beginning when private universities offered e-learning programmes.

The situation gradually started changing. Nevertheless, institutions must increase interactivity between distance learning students and support teachers on how to effectively manage interactive activities (e.g. web conferencing with multiple actors, forum asynchronous discussion, chat-like synchronous discussion). The fact that the frequency and quality of students' interaction is not assessed prevents students and teachers from valuing interaction.

Standard 3. Teaching staff

The fact that an inequitable workload between conventional and distance learning teaching was allocated, along with the employment of non-permanent staff for e-learning teaching, created a teaching and learning situation that did not guarantee the quality of e-learning nor the sustainability of the programme. The experts' reports stressed the need for staff's training on distance learning and for lessening the teaching staff's workload.

Experts draw attention to the fact that in the case of e-learning, experience does not always include skills for teaching at a distance. For this reason the academic and teaching personnel must be very well-prepared, have special skills and be ready for the particular conditions of the programme. Therefore, it is necessary for institutions to develop and implement training programmes for the academic and teaching personnel.

Students' mentoring, support and feedback will also be improved through teachers' appropriate training.

Institutions are changing the practice of staff recruitment, in order to be able to support their programmes and students, a trend that is evidenced in the new programmes.

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

In a number of cases, the experts' reports point out that the research profile of the programme and the staff, as well as of students' research skills development, is not adequate for Master's programmes. They recommend increasing the credits, and/or the number of research modules in order to align them with the demands of the Master's level. Moreover, specific research modules in the field of the programme must also be added to the generic research courses.

The absence of a research culture continues to be a big problem in all the colleges which offer Master's programmes and also in a number of universities offering e-learning Master's courses. This is also a basic factor that leads to the rejection of almost 30% of the applications for e-learning programmes.

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

Two extreme situations concerning resources for e-learning programmes have been identified, as evidenced in the experts' reports: the one refers to the institutions that succeeded in establishing a well-developed Distance Learning (DL) structure and infrastructure including appropriate policies, regulations, procedures and tools; also, in developing an appropriate pedagogical planning unit, as well as DL Programme Study Guides that fulfill e-learning standards. There is also evidence for institutions lacking an appropriate pedagogical unit and administrative personnel for student support, having poor technical infrastructure and audiovisual design. This is the picture presented by institutions that freshly submit applications for the accreditation of e-learning programmes without having any previous experience.

All institutions are well-informed that they should not apply for e-learning programmes' accreditation without, as a first step, the appropriate infrastructure, resources and policies supporting students' interaction and results.

A. Experts' recommendations

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

- The skills of the programme graduates must be detailed and aligned to the programme's modules and their objectives
- Identification of transferable skills
- Restructuring the programme of study to better reflect learning progression so that concepts operating as preconditions precede the teaching of other, more complex and cognitively more demanding concepts
- Instead of embedding knowledge across various modules, introduce focused modules
- Creating another capstone module as an alternative to a thesis

- Practical experience must be added to both the programme and the modules
- The need to include the obligation of a final dissertation at the end of the Master's programme
- The need to provide a compulsory course on Methodology, which is to be organised and provided in the first semester of the programme
- The development of clear guidelines regarding the selection of elective modules for students who decide not to take any of the three specialisation areas. These guidelines should ensure that the core knowledge expected from someone with an advanced Master's degree in the field is covered.
- Requiring all students who take the programme to do a thesis involving the solution of some complex problems.
- Introducing grade moderation at programme level. Such a process would involve producing general statistics of the grades given in different modules, comparing them, exploring the reasons underpinning significant differences between module grade statistics, and deciding whether or not actions would be necessary as a consequence. Such a process would enable the programme team and the institution to spot problems related to module delivery, assessment and, in some circumstances, content.
- We have noted a number of areas in which the new programme can be improved. These include: being more specific about the class of degree requirement for the purposes of admissions; including a further course on (...), and making it compulsory for the relevant specialisation; ensuring consistency in the length and depth of course materials by means of appropriate formal review mechanisms.
- In conclusion, in the view of the Committee, the proposal is clear, precise and sufficiently thought through with the relevant resources in place for a successful delivery.
- The programme of studies can be updated with recent advances in the field, and can adopt terminology which refers to the current state of the art
- The EEC was impressed with the programme curriculum which presented a number of good practices in terms of its overall aims, purpose and the learning outcomes for students in the early stages of the programme, as these skills are foundational to the student experience and possibility to fully engage with the learning material
- Good practice: a. Cross-disciplinary approach, b. Subscription to Turnitin , c. A sound student ombudsman system
- Making clear the content of the pre-sessional course for potential applicants
- English proficiency criteria not very clear (for example, IELTS 6.5 not stated; whether an interview will be required); no information in the programme specification about the pre-sessional seminars; introduce an introduction to method, institutions/systems and skills course as a preparatory course; continued provision of academic skills and competencies (e.g. writing skills, referencing skills etc.); giving information about what students can expect from dissertation supervisions.

- Good practice: a. A good range of assessment methods. b. Admissions criteria which encourage wide participation c. Good application of the ECTS. d. Flexible options for the busy professional (especially the Distance Learning Course).
- Student exchange (especially Erasmus) programme not convenient given the programme structure; students on DL course need to be properly informed
- Should demonstrate how the online delivery actually supports the achievement of the learning outcomes expressed in the individual modules. The course team refers to the immersed learning model for the DL course – clearer articulation on how interactivity is achieved is needed (not enough, perhaps, only to use the online discussion board).
- Define all the related policies regarding distance learning (quality assurance mechanisms and tools, guidelines for the design of distance learning activities and assessment modes, learning analytics practices and ethics policy etc.)
- In short, the Committee felt that although the programme in its first year of operation is usually of a high standard, they also believed that areas for improvement may include: The programme of study currently includes only compulsory modules and we believe that the introduction of elective modules can add to the diversity of options that the student could take. This would also enhance the quality of the online programme.
- It is not evident who the target professional group is. There are two issues here. One concerns whether the programme has a national or international focus – and therefore the extent to which it prepares students for working in Cyprus or elsewhere. The other concerns whether students are being prepared to work individually with a pupil or whether they will be working in a mainstream class and collaborating with colleagues, helping them in turn to develop their practices. This requires important skills of supporting change in classes/schools.
- We have concerns about the extent to which the taught programme is based on current/recent evidence-based practice. Master’s 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
- Learning outcomes of courses and clear connections with employability should be clarified

Standard 2. Teaching and learning

- Care should also be taken to ensure that all teaching/learning material that is yet to be developed to support the distance learning delivery of the programme will comply with the good practice that was evidenced for the already developed material that the Evaluation Committee had the opportunity to scrutinise
- Ensuring that a set of predefined assessment criteria (rubrics) is clearly described, consistently used, and communicated to all teaching personnel and students. The EEC recommends that the institution’s senior management consider ensuring an equitable workload between conventional and distance learning teaching.
- Before the programme can start, however, the panel recommends that the following weaknesses (including specific comments in Sections 1-5) be addressed: The

teaching team needs to ensure timely feedback to students on top of self-assessment. The teaching team needs to provide consistent criteria for marking (e.g. penalties when the word limit is exceeded). The panel encourages appointing one of the full-time teaching staff members per semester to oversee the work quality of special scientists and support them in their academic teaching. There is a lack of sufficient training mechanisms. The Rector should initiate the process for the appointment of the appropriate personnel to establish the pedagogical planning unit for DL programmes.

- Providing compulsory Distance Learning teaching training
- Providing more by way of indicative answers to coursework questions and generic feedback to the cohort
- Giving sufficient recognition to the large workload involved in setting up a new Distance Learning course, by making appropriate adjustments to the teaching allocation
- Support needs to be provided in terms of the writing of competitive research grants and preparing publications to be submitted to high quality international academic journals, which will feed directly into the curriculum and improve student experience. Also, the university should better support the teaching staff throughout the delivery of the DL programme. Investment in human resources should be undertaken to improve the pedagogical development of the programme.
- Supervision training for visiting lecturers (given that some VLS are not active academic researchers but eminent professionals) for both the programmes.
- Need to employ permanent staff in order to ensure sustainability
- Give more opportunities for student feedback
- To consider using some of the research projects as a platform for learning and teaching (for instance, the project could be used as a case study for formative assessment or self-reflection)
- No sample teaching materials available for scrutiny
- No actual mock-up of the web learning platform for scrutiny
- A more intense mentoring mechanism can be implemented, catering for the individual needs of the students who have different backgrounds
- In the near future, the universities should consider accommodating students who may not necessarily be interested in working in the Greek public education sector. A more elaborate international dimension (e.g. teach in English) should also be considered to ensure the sustainability of the programme
- Develop staff skills in distance learning pedagogy
- Give good detailed feedback on assignments
- Provide clear signposting to learning support and educational materials that provide study skills for persons who may have been out of academia for some years;
- Have a summer school where students meet for a face-to-face debate and hear visiting tutors as well as their own regular tutors regarding specialist research content.
- Ensuring that a set of predefined assessment criteria (rubrics) is clearly described, consistently used, and communicated to all teaching personnel and students.

Standard 3. Teaching staff

- Define the teachers' training procedures and materials (both the technical and pedagogical ones).
- More training for colleagues on distance learning
- The fact that currently only online units of assessment take place to assess the performance of the students in each module constitutes a possible area for improvement in this programme
- The lecturers have adequate professional and educational backgrounds and are in a position to support students
- The EEC recommends that the institution's senior management consider ensuring an equitable workload between conventional and distance learning teaching.

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

- Research time and provision of resources and incentives for research to resident staff would need to be enhanced (and have to be included in the work allocation model). This would increase the research-led dimension of the programme and the research profile of institution
- Research and synergies with teaching must be enhanced
- A second limitation was identified in relation to the research capacity and capability of some of the members of the teaching staff. This was also recognised by the programme team during the on-site visit.
- Redesigning the Research Methodology module to make it a compulsory module for all students whether or not they do a thesis
- The Research Methods module does not refer to research methodologies or indeed a bibliography with some of the most important research materials in the field, so that research becomes an essential requirement of the first semester and is hence embedded throughout the whole programme.

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

- The university has established a well-developed structure and infrastructure for DL.
- A pedagogical planning unit has been successfully developed
- Technical specifications of IT equipment should be made clear to students (including, for example, processing speed and data storage). There is no sample of the VLE (virtual learning environment) training module for students and staff. A useful model should include an FAQ troubleshooting sheet, contact details of the IT support team, a "how to" video, and a forum board for students to post problems/concerns. Clearer information in the module specifications as to how often discussions on the platform should take place. Consider assessing participation in the forums to encourage engagement from students.
- Articulate a target IT support staff-student ratio.
- The programme quality assurance arrangements were clear and well-defined overall
- The procedures detailed for the management of the programme were also of a high standard.

- All quality assurance aspects, student welfare services and administrative structures and procedures are of high standard.
- Establish a Pedagogical Planning Unit, according to the recent criteria of DIPAE
- Improve technical infrastructure (create a teleconference studio)
- Student support website is excellent – especially for DL students
- Devise a careers support scheme which is relevant specifically to postgraduate students (perhaps build on the excellent programme for undergraduates)
- Monitoring mechanisms must be flexible and give solutions to all the necessary infrastructure of the programme. The monitoring mechanisms include supporting the students and NOT just monitoring them.

ANNEX:

Codes and patterns for e-learning programmes according to the EEC reports

(The accredited programmes responded positively to the recommendations)

STANDARD	SUB-CATEGORIES	OBSERVATIONS	UNIVERSITIES FREQUENCY/ %
1.	Content	Lack of the necessary practical experience	6 /23 %
		Lack of needed pre-sessions	13/50%
		Necessity to add a thesis	8/31%
		Non-research oriented	16/61%
	QA Processes	Lack of pedagogical unit	6/23%
		Lack of differentiated provisions for students with different background	13/50%
		Lack of adequate interactivity	16/61%
2.	Teaching and Learning	Non-research led	12/46%
		Lack of interactivity	16/61%
		Improving teaching material	12/46%
3.	Teaching staff	Inadequate number of permanent staff	20/77%
		Shortage	5/19%
		Lack of expertise in e-	12/46%

		learning teaching	
4.	Research	Missing teachers' involvement	16/61%
		Missing students' involvement	16/61%
		Lack of research publications	16/61%
5.	Resources		
		Inadequate infrastructure	6/23%
		Inadequate administrative services	10/38%