

Doc. 300.1.2

Date: January 9, 2020

Higher Education Institution's response

- **Higher education institution:**
University of Cyprus
- **Town:**
Nicosia
- **Programme of study (Name, ECTS, duration, cycle)**
In Greek:
Διδακτορικό στη Βιοποικιλότητα και την Οικολογία
(3-8 έτη, 240 ECTS)
In English:
Ph.D. in Biodiversity and Ecology
(3-8 years, 240 ECTS)
- **Language of instruction:**
English
- **Programme's status**
New programme: No
Currently operating: Yes

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 and 2016” [N. 136 (I)/2015 and N. 47(I)/2016].

A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area.*
- *In particular, under each assessment area, the HEI must respond on, without changing the format of the report:*
 - *the findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
 - *the deficiencies noted under the quality indicators (criteria)*
 - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The HEI's response must follow below the EEC's comments, which must be copied from the external evaluation report (Doc. 300.1.1).*
- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development

(ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.8, 1.9)

We thank the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) for their work and thorough effort. We agree with the EEC that our *Ph.D.* program complies with European standards and that the excellent research orientation of the program is one of its hallmarks.

As the EEC points out, the course-based ECTS are obtained through courses also available to MSc students. Nevertheless, we have to point out that these are courses perfectly suitable to the *Ph.D.* program, as their content is advanced and specialized, covering important areas of expertise necessary to all *Ph.D.* students, especially those who have not attended a relevant MSc course before. Of course, the possibility of additional courses is significantly constrained also by the small number of faculty and the severe problems of inadequate space.

The EEC also mentions that *Ph.D.* students do not receive training in general skills such as high impact writing, time management, personal development, presentation skills etc. However, we consider that students do acquire such skills throughout their training as *Ph.D.* candidates. For example, students hone their time management skills while conducting their thesis research under the close supervision of their thesis advisor. They are also required to have at least one first-author publication (or accepted for publication) of original research work for their *Ph.D.* in a peer-reviewed, internationally recognized scientific journal prior to graduation, thus providing training in scientific writing. Also, students attend two hourly mandatory lectures, one on how to write a scientific paper and one on how to prepare a scientific poster. Furthermore, they gain training in scientific writing through existing postgraduate courses (e.g., BIO868, BIO871), which include as assignments publication-style reports. Finally, presentation skills are mastered through courses that require oral presentations on a regular basis (e.g. BIO861, BIO862, BIO863, BIO867) in addition to the Comprehensive Examination and Research Thesis Proposal, as well as through participation in scientific conferences. With regards to additional soft skills, the Career Development Office of the University of Cyprus, offers students and graduates with training seminars and workshops such as CV writing, Interview Techniques, Presentation Skills, Networking Techniques, Time Management, Problem Solving, Network Techniques and Public Speaking. Unfortunately, the Career Office does not promote or announce these activities in English, therefore, these events are not readily available to our students who do not speak Greek. We are negotiating with the Career Office the options to announce and provide some of these seminars in English, given that a sufficient number of students are attending.

2. Teaching, learning and student assessment (ESG 1.3)

We thank the EEC for its comments. Although the small number of students can impair the mandatory anonymous questionnaire feedback, as the EEC mentions, the personal relations between students and teachers are strong and, as such, provide an open pathway of communication, evaluation and feedback between students and their thesis supervisors.

We appreciate the EEC's recommendation of providing our students with a broader set of general skills which we do strive to provide through specific program requirements, such as a first author peer-reviewed publication in an internationally recognized scientific journal, participation in scientific meetings and through the individual training each student receives from their thesis supervisor. Also, students attend two hourly mandatory lectures, one on how to write a scientific paper and one on how to prepare a scientific poster. Also, our students have the opportunity to refine their career development skills, through the Career Development Office of the University of Cyprus, which, provides students and graduates with either one-on-one meetings or through seminars and special events. However, as indicated in Section 1, these events are exclusively announced in Greek and for the most part, are also taught in Greek, but we are negotiating the teaching of some of these, in English too.

3. Teaching Staff (ESG 1.5)

In addition to your response to EEA's comments on the teaching staff:

- a. fill in TABLE 1: TEACHING STAFF at the end of this form and
- b. send the curriculum vitae of all the program lecturers on the forms posted on the Agency's website as an annex. (Form 500.1.03 for Universities and Form 500.1.04 for Higher Education Institutes)

We are glad that the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) agrees with our assessment of the program of study. As the EEC has pointed out, our *Ph.D.* in Biodiversity and Ecology program is principally organized around the existing permanent teaching faculty. We expect that recruitment of additional faculty will increase variability in *Ph.D.* committees. However, it is unlikely that the Department will reach its full Teaching and Research Faculty capacity, or even increase significantly in size, in the following years due to the existing limitations in finance and in building infrastructure.

We also note the EEC's suggestion to utilize the unique geographic and ecological environment in Cyprus as means to promote our programs of study in biodiversity and ecology. Given this recommendation, our Department has already requested funding and assistance from the central UCY authorities in order to improve the visibility and attractiveness of our programs of study at an international level.

The suggestion of the EEC to '*attract other Universities to run field courses in Cyprus, in collaboration with staff and students of this programme*' is interesting but this does not depend entirely on our Department. For example, we are aware that several universities from the U.K. do organize such field-trips, but to the northern, occupied part of Cyprus, due to logistic reasons (mostly lower cost of living). In addition, the timing of our study program is often incompatible with that of other close-by countries (e.g., Greece, where field-trips are usually organized in June). Nevertheless, we will keep this suggestion in mind and will make every effort to encourage such collaborative field courses in the future.

4. Students (ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)

We thank the EEC for its efforts to obtain a thorough view of our Department through the assessment of our faculty as well as through the perception and experience of our students. We are particularly pleased to see that the positive feedback our faculty receive from our students align with the assessment of the EEC.

Regarding the lack of adequate information of foreign students on course workload, we have to note that all this information is explicitly given in the post-graduate studies guidelines, available at the Department's website. We have also amended some problems arising from lack of information in English, but these were not related to ECTS from courses *Ph.D.* students should secure.

The issue of extending studies beyond the 'funded period' of *Ph.D.* students stems probably from some misunderstanding by the EEC, since *Ph.D.* students at the University of Cyprus actually pay fees instead of being funded, a policy to which our Department has objected, repeatedly. Unfortunately, there is only a very limited number of students who receive scholarships for their *Ph.D.* studies. In any case, while the rules of *Ph.D.* studies, including duration and steps necessary, are set by the School of Post-Graduate Studies and by the Senate of our University, our Department has taken the measure to support doctoral students by reimbursing their tuition fees in full or in part, when possible with Departmental funds.

As mentioned previously, our Department considers that the students receive training on broader *Ph.D.* skills primarily through the close interactions with their thesis supervisors and through the requirements of the program of study. With regards to writing skills our students also attend two hourly mandatory seminars, one on how to write a scientific paper and one on how to prepare a scientific poster. They are also required to write at least one first-author original scientific publication as part of their coursework requirement. Students also attend international scientific seminars which allows them to build further on their presentation skills.

5. Resources (ESG 1.6)

We fully agree with the EEC that the severe space constraints pose a burden to the daily functions of the Department. They also pose severe difficulties in formulating both immediate and future plans for growth and development and, consequently, affect further development of our programs of study. The considerable delays in the construction of the new building, which is expected to cover all current and future space requirements of the Department, have stretched for more than a decade. Current estimates for the completion of the new building stands at more than four years from now, without this deadline being solidified, since construction has not yet started.

Our Department is currently in close collaboration with central university administration in a coordinated effort to obtain additional space within the existing university facilities, in order to accommodate more immediate needs.

6. Additional for distance learning programmes (*ALL ESG*)

Not applicable.

7. Additional for doctoral programmes (*ALL ESG*)

As the EEC indicates, many relevant recommendations have been addressed in previous sections of this assessment and thus will not be discussed further. We also agree with the EEC's recommendation that *Ph.D.* students should have ample opportunities to attend conferences and visit other institutions and in extend build up their own academic network which is necessary for their future academic career.

Even though departmental faculty support these activities through research funding, we do agree that it would be of great benefit if the University could provide additional funding to increase the frequency of such activities to a more suitable level.

8. Additional for joint programmes (*ALL ESG*)

Not applicable.

B. Conclusions and final remarks

We thank the External Evaluation Committee for their positive review and recommendations. As a Department, we strive to provide our students with the highest quality academic training possible, given the limitations outlined by the EEC. Since its establishment in 2002, the growth and development of the Department of Biological Sciences have been remarkable. The Department now boasts a broad range of research areas, the highest concentration of state-of-the-art research infrastructure and the largest selection of academic programs in the biological sciences in Cyprus. Qualitative indicators such as competitive external research funding, high-impact publications, and international collaborations, attest to the continuous and diligent efforts of the Department to produce and disseminate knowledge, based on good international practices of research and scholarship.

This exponential academic growth of the Department, however, is not matched by a matching expansion in building infrastructure. Teaching, office and laboratory space is sparse and prohibits the employment of additional Teaching and Research Faculty, which would add to the disciplines of expertise of current faculty and limit or eliminate the need for temporary teaching staff. The considerable delays in the construction of the new building impose hurdles in the growth and development of the Department and, by extension, further development of our programs of study. The current unofficial estimate for the completion of the new building stands at more than four years without that deadline being solidified, since construction has not yet started. As of November 2019, a concerted effort by the Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences and central University offices is underway to find additional space to accommodate the needs of our Department.

We also do agree with the recommendation of the EEC to UCY central authorities to support promoting and advertising the Biodiversity and Ecology programs of study and the activities necessary for their optimal function, such as additional field courses and increasing visiting specialists.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Assoc. Prof. Pantelis Georgiades	<i>Department Chairperson</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Prof. Niovi Santama	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Coordinator</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Assist. Prof. Anna Papadopoulou	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Member</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Assist. Prof. Chrysoula Pitsouli	Postgraduate Studies Committee of the Department <i>Member</i> <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Prof. Spyros Sfenthourakis	Member of the Internal Evaluation Committee for the Programs of Study in Biodiversity and Ecology <i>Faculty of the Department</i>	
Dr. Dora C. Stylianou	Internal Evaluation Committees for Programs of Study and for the Department <i>Member</i> <i>University Officer</i>	

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