Doc. 300.1.2

Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: 1/2/2021

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

- **Town: Nicosia**

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

  In Greek:

  Μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα σπουδών στην

  Εκπαιδευτική Ηγεσία και Πολιτική (ΜΑ, 90 ECTS)

  In English:

  Master's degree Programme in 'Educational

  Leadership and Policy' (MA, 90 ECTS)

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

- **Programme's status: New**

ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ
REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

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. 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, <u>without changing the format of the report</u>:*

  - *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)

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 proposed graduate programme in Educational Leadership and Policy with 90 ECTS is newly designed and should be offered at the next possible point in time. The programme is well designed insofar as it is well structured, and in accordance with the strategy of the Open University of Cyprus (OUC) and grounded in a particular academic discourse, referred to in programme documentation. It seeks to expand participation beyond the usual participants of the OUC to other regions outside Greece and Cyprus. This appears to be the rationale for developing a programme that mirrors that already offered by the OUC in Greek. By doing that, the programme proposers seek opportunities to establish networks with other countries and attract participants from a wider geographic area than those normally participating in OUC programmes. The aims are quite broad and follow Bloom's learning taxonomy (see application, pp. 9-12). A challenge will be the potential heterogeneity of students as the aims state that both competence development of one's own research on leadership and competence development of one's own practice in leadership should occur. The programme covers areas such as organisation theories, leadership and management theories, systems theory, organisational change, quality management, school effectiveness, school improvement, evaluation approaches, strategic planning, and quantitative research methods.

The EEC comes to the conclusion, based on the application, the study guides, and information derived from meetings during the on-site visit, that the educational leadership field's current academic discourse is not mirrored in all of the programme's facets. In particular, it is suggested that neither the programme content nor the research upon which it is based are up-to-date or cutting edge; rather, both reflect academic discourses that were current in the late 20th century, and that have now been superseded, and, in some cases, questioned, within the educational leadership research and scholarship community. The EEC is concerned by, for example, statements in several of the course study guides that imply acceptance that school leaders – those holding principalships or headships – are key determinants of school quality and effectiveness, as indicated by student learning gains. Yet during at least the last decade – and probably a longer period – such causal links have been increasingly challenged and it is now generally accepted that there is no really compelling evidential basis to them. The oversimplified assumption of effective leadership that is presented in the study guides is strongly criticised by critical theoretical discourse – and this discourse is entirely missing from the programme curriculum. It is therefore of concern to the EEC that students enrolling on this programme will not be exposed to alternative perspectives to the heroic leadership one that is perceived as the key to school effectiveness, and, indeed, that they will not be exposed to other up-to-date critical leadership studies. The EEC therefore suggests that the presentation of leadership approaches, theories and theoretical perspectives needs to be problematised and presented within a framework of critical discourse. In this way programme participants will be provided with the conceptual and practical tools to both critique and apply current and emerging theories of educational leadership and related fields.

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Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.
Besides the focus on competence development in various arenas, and allowing for the potential heterogeneity of the participants, the focus on the importance of contextual leadership in complex environments seems to be a very interesting strength, and should be developed. Moreover, the modules are well designed at a *structural* level, even though we feel that, in places, their content needs to be updated.

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 **suggests** that the programme team should reflect on the aims, whether the facilitators of the different modules and in particular the different tutors see potential in achieving both to a higher degree, that the practice and the research "route" of the programme can be successfully completed.

OUC Response:
The Programme's academic team is always selected after a worldwide call for interest. The Tutors, i.e. Adjunct Faculty, are then selected on a competitive basis and based on published criteria such as relevance of expertise; research output, especially during the last 5 years; overall teaching experience, and especially over the last 5 years, and availability. Moreover, for programmes of international appeal such as this, which will be offered in English, efforts will be made to have guest lecturers from specific countries, based on where students come from.

Moreover – even though it was stated by Prof. Pashiardis and colleagues that the current bibliographies are intended solely as foundation texts - it is suggested that the underlying research, reflected in the bibliographies, should be up-dated. As one of the programme's stated aims is to disseminate cutting edge research, **the EEC argues that this is essential.** By doing this, critical perspectives within the discourse in leadership and management research could be included, as well as leadership in different contexts beyond education. Additionally, it would be interesting to include literature by authors from different geographical regions, including those of the anticipated students.

Among the texts recommended, are: a recent book by Ärlestig, Johansson and Day to map the state of research in 25 countries, articles by Hallinger et al. and Tian & Huber that map the discipline. Critical (educational) leadership scholarship by key scholars such as Peter Gronn, Helen Gunter, Jacky Lumby, James Spillane and others should be included, and chapter 3 of Linda Evans's 2018 book on professors as academic leaders offers a 'new wave' critical leadership perspective on the concept of leadership. A book to be published by Bloomsbury in 2021 on critical leadership (edited by Steven Courtney, Helen Gunter and others) will serve as an excellent core textbook. The Handbook of Governance, Leadership, Management and Administration in Education by Springer, which is on the way, could serve to enrich the list of literature included in bibliographies. Since it is intended to attract students from the Arab world, the work of researchers of Islamic leadership – such as Saeeda Shah (Leicester University, UK) – would be a valuable addition. Finally, work by scholars such as Hood, McNamara, Brown & O'Hara and Altrichter in the area of

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culturally responsive evaluation and leadership might also be included, given the focus on context in the stated aims of the programme.

OUC Response:
The suggested bibliography guides students to the various concepts introduced by the Thematic Units/Modules of the Programme. Given that this is a Master's degree Programme, students are expected to develop their research skills and seek additional bibliography to support their studies. Considering the suggestions made by the EEC, the bibliography of various Modules has been updated to include texts on critical leadership issues, critical theoretical discourse, gender issues, and strategic planning in education (Please refer to **Annex 1**). We should bear in mind that based on the internal quality assurance mechanisms applied at the Open University of Cyprus, all Programmes of Study and Modules are evaluated at the end each academic year, so as to update their content and bibliography. Hence, bibliography is always updated to reflect recent scientific findings and trends.

Moreover, the Programme will invite distinguished speakers (academics, researchers and practitioners) from various countries for guest lectures, thus providing students of the Programme the opportunity to learn from different theoretical frameworks, processes and practices of different geographical regions. Moreover, students, who are expected to be adults with experience in educational contexts, will bring their own personal and cultural experiences, during the online discussions.

The EEC also has a concern about the predominant focus on quantitative research methods in applied educational research – not least because the bulk of educational leadership research in the 21st century is done by qualitative methods, including ethnography. **We suggest**, as discussed in the meeting, **broadening the focus to include qualitative research, particularly in linkage to the units on evaluation.** To include qualitative research methods of data collection and analysis could be very helpful for three reasons: first, to serve the aim of the programme in understanding context, complexity and contingency; second, to broaden students' perspectives on research - even mixed-method approaches are important; third, to enhance the motivation, prior knowledge, and applications potential of students (besides the over-researched field in practice with its low response rates and the enormous amount of unanalysed date by quantitative approaches).

OUC Response:
The Thematic Unit EPA510 / Applied Educational Research: Quantitative Methods, although highlighting in its title the "quantitative methods", contains learning units that focus on qualitative approaches to research. The Study Guide of this particular module has been revised (please refer to **Annex 2**) to incorporate enhanced bibliography on qualitative research. Chapters related to qualitative and mixed research approaches are introduced.

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The EEC **also recommends** expanding the evaluation of teaching and teachers to the organisation level with additional process factors.

OUC Response:

When various approaches for the evaluation of teachers and teaching are considered, reference is always made to School Improvement approaches. This is done in order to imbed and relate this kind of evaluation into specific organizational contexts, according to the students' backgrounds and work-settings.

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

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 HEI is explicit in its commitment to the wellbeing of the student cohort undertaking this programme and seeks, through its programme and assessment structures, to ensure that the content, methods and activities are relevant and useful to the programme participants. Both student and staff representatives confirmed the supportive nature of the structures and relationships developed in the HEI in general and there appears to be no reason to doubt that a similar approach will be underpin this new programme.
The applied, research focused and experiential nature of many of the assessment tasks appear appropriate to the cohort undertaking a programme in educational leadership. In addition the nature of the feedback, structure of assessment tasks and commitment to the support of students at all levels appears to be important.

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.
Connection of leadership an evaluation as twin academic foci of programme
Detailed linkage of LOs and assessment activities
Nature of feedback structures
Applied nature of many of assessment activities
Centrality of research as a key theme of programme and assessment

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.

Broadening of curriculum focus beyond Anglo-American literature

OUC Response:
We know for a fact that the Anglo-American literature is predominant in our field and the vast majority of publications is in English and much less in other languages, where important research is being undertaken and published (such as German, Swedish, Greek, etc.). Having said that, the effort will be to enrich the bibliography for the main curriculum through the varied backgrounds of the tutors to be hired.

Need for more explicit appeals criteria

OUC Response:
All students' assignments submitted on the University's eLearning Platform are checked for plagiarism and are marked by the Tutor of the particular Student Cohort. The University already has in place a procedure for

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appeals against marks and request for reassessment (included in the University's Internal Regulations for Studies). Reassessment is done by two external reviewers appointed by the Dean of the relevant Faculty, who are not teaching the particular Student Cohort. Moreover, students have the right to appeal to their Tutor, then to the Module Coordinator and then to the Academic Coordinator of the Programme (3 levels). The work conducted by Tutors is evaluated by the Programme's Academic Coordinator, who has the right to check the assessed work and feedback provided to students by their Tutors. We thus trust that these procedures in place safeguards students' rights and proper moderation of the assessed work.

Broadening of understanding of research thematic area beyond quantitative research

OUC Response:
The Thematic Unit EPA510 / Applied Educational Research: Quantitative Methods, although highlighting in its title the "quantitative methods", contains learning units that focus on qualitative approaches to research. The Study Guide of this particular module has been revised (please refer to **Annex 2**) to incorporate enhanced bibliography on qualitative research, and chapters related to qualitative and mixed research approaches are introduced.

Need to include culture and cultural responsiveness as criteria for engaging with core literature.

OUC Response:
During the online group tutorials and discussions students will infuse their own cultural backgrounds and how they relate (or don't) to the literature presented and the various contexts where they come from.

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3. Teaching Staff
(ESG 1.5)

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.

Many staff are experienced teachers of e-learning programmes, but new appointees must – along with experienced staff - undertake regular mandatory training on distance learning at the OU of Cyprus. All of those with whom the EEC met, and who are expected to undertake the bulk of the teaching on the programme, are appropriately qualified.

The mandatory training/development referred to above was introduced over a year ago and applies to all teaching staff. It is assessed on a pass/fail basis; it must be passed, and staff members are permitted two attempts to pass it. Adjunct teaching staff in particular commented on how helpful and supportive they had found this provision. Feedback on their teaching is discussed with staff in appraisal meetings, where strategies for development are discussed.

All newly appointed faculty members and adjunct staff are provided with training and development opportunities in relation to teaching methods used at the OUC and, specifically, they are taught to use the university's eLearning platform and other eLearning tools. Tutorials, videos and manuals are available online as supplementary support.

Teaching is assessed both by peers and by students, through feedback. Teaching expertise and proficiency are taken into consideration in recruitment and selection.

The programme content overall very closely reflects the research interests and expertise of the staff delivering it – although additional adjunct staff are likely to be recruited, and they may be selected on the basis of matching their research interests to the course content. Matching existing staff's research interests and expertise with course design, however, potentially makes for a rather unbalanced curriculum, resulting in omission of key topical areas and issues if there is no one currently on the staff who researches such issues or areas. To a large extent, this matching of interests with course content occurs in all HEI taught programmes worldwide, but, once this OU of Cyprus programme is accredited and starts to run, there is scope to widen the range of topics/issues covered and to recruit adjunct or visiting staff to teach them. It is noted that the OUC's current policy does not allow the employment of visiting academics.

Since the programme being evaluated is a new one, and has not yet been rolled out, assessments of the research-teaching synergy can only be based on stated intentions. It is stated that the programme is intended to include evidence-informed research on 'real' schools and other educational institutions through the creation of professional learning communities where the production of research in the area of educational leadership and policy internationally (as well as locally), is infused in everyday practice, promoting a culture of research use that is incorporated into the programme content and delivery. Regular accessing and interpretation of collected research data and findings are intended to be included in course content across the programme. Specific emphasis is intended to be placed on the understanding of research approaches and methods and the strengths and limitations of each, as well as the ability to understand how the findings of any given study can be effectively re-contextualised. The aim is stated as

ensuring that students apply research-based evidence to their practice adds, relying on it much more than on conventional wisdom.

It is noted, too, that the Open University of Cyprus applies a model regarding the division of the academic personnel's teaching load in the three main categories of activities: teaching, research and administrative work. In the case of OUC faculty members, the teaching load is expected to account for about one third of their overall time, leaving the other two thirds for research and administrative work. Therefore, the academic personnel's teaching load is intended to avoid limiting engagement with research, publications and making contributions to society. This policy should support research-informed teaching. However, the EEC also notes that much of the research incorporated into the programme as a basis of its courses is rather dated and fails to reflect the most up-to-date and state-of-the-art discourses in the field of educational leadership research. This issue was discussed very briefly on the evaluation day with the university rector, who is the programme director. He assured the EEC that much more up-to-date research and related discourses would be incorporated into the programme and reflected in course bibliographies. Whilst this assurance is welcome, the EEC is also concerned that the pool of core teaching staff for this programme may draw upon those who are not necessarily engaged in cutting-edge research that would make the MA programme a flagship research-based programme that reflects 21st century discourses in the field, and that addresses an up-to-date research agenda.

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

Among the teaching staff who met with the EEC, there was evident enthusiasm, high morale and satisfaction and a sense of a good team spirit. The students with whom the EEC met indicated extremely high levels of satisfaction with their teaching staff (most of whom will be those delivering the programme being evaluated) – above all, they emphasised teaching staff's supportive attitudes and their availability. It is evident that teaching staff are committed to providing an excellent student experience that includes nurturing and supporting students in all aspects of their lives as students at the OUC.

The programme being evaluated will benefit from having as its co-ordinator a distinguished professor who has a high profile among the educational leadership research community in Europe. This should ensure that the programme is research-led. Another strength is the incorporation into the programme of student research as a basis for professional practice – and the students with whom the EEC met confirmed that this research focus had greatly contributed to their own professional practice, enhancing it and injecting rigour into it.

There is evidently a research culture at the OUC, with all teaching staff being encouraged to engage with research, and to apply their research specialisms and expertise to the design and delivery of their courses. High standards are in place to ensure that teaching staff recruited are appropriately qualified for the substantive and methodological elements of what they teach, and engage in research to inform their teaching.

Staff professional development and training provision is good, and several members of the teaching staff who met with the EEC highlighted the benefits of enagaging with such provision.

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Staff recruitment is transparent, aimed at ensuring high standards, and draws upon the expertise of external – often overseas-based – expert advice, who form part of appointments panels.

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

The EEC is rather concerned by much of the content of the programme, as indicated in study guides. In particular, there are significant omissions of topics and issues that reflect up-to-date discourses in the field, and which have been current for around the last decade or more, while very dated issues and perspectives dominate the content of the study guides. While much of this concern applies to and is addressed within section 1 of this report, it also reflects the issues covered in this section, for the EEC feels that this apparent out-datedness of course content reflects the research activity, foci and expertise of teaching staff – in particular, and notwithstanding the rector's response to these concerns when they were expressed on the evaluation day, the EEC is concerned that those members of the programme teaching team who hold professional posts may simply not have had the time or opportunity to keep up with the most up-to-date research in the field, and, as a result, the research upon which they base course content is not state-of-the-art.

OUC Response:
We do consider that the proposed Programme of Study and its content reflects up-to-date discourses in the field, and taken into account the EEC's recommendation, all Thematic Units' reading lists have been updated to include more recent references. Please refer to Annex 2 for the additional bibliography included in the various Modules.

To address this problem, if the OUC wants this programme to truly reflect the most up-to-date research and associated discourses, it would benefit greatly from the involvement of distinguished overseas-based researchers in the field of (educational) leadership and policy, as visiting professors. This would mean revisiting the university's policy on employing visiting academics. Such visiting professors' involvement might initially be confined to a small number of guest lectures, which may be an extra-curricular element of the programme – thus adding value to the student experience. Categorising them as keynotes would, by raising the status of such guest lectures, encourage the participation of distinguished academics. While the OUC rector is himself very familiar with the educational leadership research community and should be able to identify potential guest lecturers whose involvement is likely to enhance the programme by contributing to a programme of controversial lectures intended to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking, the EEC chair, Linda Evans, is most willing to offer suggestions, if required.

OUC Response:
The current legislation of the Open University of Cyprus does not allow for Visiting Professors, and OUC is already taking steps to revise its governing law. Yet, as with all other Programmes of Study offered by the Open University of Cyprus, there is the opportunity to invite guest lecturers either through the Erasmus+ Mobility Programme or without funding to offer guest public talks. These guest lectures normally take place through the University's eLearning Platform, and are thus open to students as well as the general public.

Moreover, the Programme will organize various scientific events, talks and conferences with distinguished academics and practitioners. Through such events, and with the participation of academics and researchers from various countries, students of the Programme will be introduced to frameworks and practices of different geographical regions. Moreover, students who are expected to be adults with experience in a variety of educational contexts, will bring their own personal experiences.

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4. Students

(ESG 1.4, 1.6, 1.7)

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.

Through the on-site visit and the study of the material given provided by the OUC, it seems that student access policies are implemented consistently. For the admission requirements, students' prior education is assessed. As indicated by students met through the onsite visit, there are no clear criteria relating to work experience; students' interests and what they want to do in the future are the considerations. Students' degrees are taken into consideration for admission, to build an image about the theoretical or practical knowledge the candidates already have; applicants must hold a degree from an accredited university/tertiary education institution, have very good knowledge of the English language, since the programme is offered in English, and have competency in the use of computers and Microsoft programs. Processes and tools for collecting information about student progression are in place. Each faculty collects information about each student's progress; this exercise is manageable because of the small number of students in each class in master programmes. Very frequent communication and strong relationships between teachers and students are evident, because as the teachers said, they want to make up for having little face-to-face interaction with students. Synchronous and asynchronous communication tools facilitate frequent support, such as eClass, office hours, telephone, emails, virtual communication, and face-to-face meetings.

Appeals processes that involve external groups are in place for addressing problems, with the intention of keeping students happy and satisfied with their programmes. Student–centredness is a key tenet of the university's espoused culture and principles, where students' individual needs and interests are taken into consideration. As indicated by the students with whom the EEC met, frequent and regular evaluation occurs through weekly assignments, in order to monitor their progression. Students are given feedback every week – provision that, as the student representatives told the EEC, is of great benefit to them in preparing them for the final exams; the weekly assignments are manageable.

The students with whom the EEC met highlighted the excellent support they receive from their teachers, and the very good relationships they enjoy with them; they feel there is understanding on the part of their teachers, with whom they are in touch all year round, and who are readily available for discussion and for addressing problems.

From studying the documentation provided to the EEC, it seems that there is fair recognition of higher education qualifications that ensure students' progress in their studies. Students enrolled in a programme of study offered by the Open University of Cyprus can apply for module recognition and transfer of credit units. This recognition can involve up to 25% of the programme's total ECTS units. Students enrolled in a programme of study offered by the Open University of Cyprus, who have successfully completed stand-alone thematic units or another programmes offered by the OUC, can apply for module recognition and credit transfer, depending on the relevance of the modules, as long as these do not exceed 50% of the total ECTS credits of the programme in which they are enrolled.

Students are awarded 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. The master's degree is approved by the president and board of trustees of Saint Louis

University. A diploma supplement is issued for all students participating in mobility programmes, such as Erasmus, and is in line with European and international standards.

Strengths
A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.
There are evidently extremely high levels of support and understanding between students and their teachers, cemented by strong relationships, student-centeredness, frequent and regular evaluation to monitor students' progress. This provision results in high levels of student satisfaction with the OUC. The rule which allows study periods to last for up to six years provides valued flexibility for part-time students facing changes and challenges in their professional and personal lives.

This programme provides many employment opportunities. Its graduates can be gainfully employed as, inter alia, officers in national ministries of education or regional educational regional offices, school principals or headteachers and other senior leadership positions in schools, school inspectors/advisors, officers at banking institutions' educational centres, university research centres, etc.

The EEC was impressed by the ambitions of university, and specifically of the programme staff, to recruit students from a diversity of academic backgrounds, including international students from all over the world. This ambition is well aligned with the aims of an open university.

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.

One recommendation is to continue developing effective strategies for attracting international students and strengthening collaborations with overseas universities. This postgraduate programme in Educational Leadership and Policy could be advertised in various ways abroad, in Europe and on other continents.

OUC Response:
The Open University of Cyprus manages student recruitment centrally.

The majority of the OUC Programmes of Study are offered in Greek, thus the University aims to attract students principally from Cyprus and Greece, as well as Greek-speaking students located anywhere in the world, due to the OUC's distance learning nature. OUC's student recruitment campaigns exploit various communication media, such as traditional and new Media; Social Media; billboards; press releases; mailing lists; printed and online promotional material; participation in educational fairs in Cyprus, Greece and abroad; Google Adwords campaigns; etc. OUC's main messages highlight the university's emphasis on quality; flexibility to organize one's study to respect personal and professional commitments; benefits of studying online; competitive tuition fees and various scholarships available to prospective students; state-of-the-art eLearning Platform developed in-house by OUC; and the university's expertise and know-how (almost 20 years since its establishment in 2002) in open and distance education, as well as the renowned faculty and adjunct faculty that coordinate and teach in all programmes and support the students' educational paths.

Thus, the new Master Programme in 'Educational Leadership and Policy' will be promoted not only to Greek-speaking populations that will be more inclined to attend an English-taught programme, but also to English-

speaking audiences in target countries, such as the EU (considering that OUC is a public university and thus its degree titles are accredited in the European Union), and surrounding countries (Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and more generally to North African countries) where the demand for such programs of study, in Educational Leadership and Policy, is extremely high. OUC has the expertise and the skilfulness in this field, which, generally speaking, these countries do not have. This need became evident through personal contacts with academics in these countries. Moreover, the Open University of Cyprus will use networks, such as the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM), as well as associations of Cypriot expatriates, to promote the Programme to foreign students.

OUC also offers scholarships to target audiences in the form of bilateral agreements, for example to citizens of third countries, employees of other public organizations, to Cypriot expatriates, members of certain associations, etc., and this scholarship scheme can be used to further market the new Programme.

It is not mentioned what admissions criteria will be used if prospective students present certification and documentation obtained from institutions other than universities within Cyprus and Greece. How are these dealt with? Who deals with foreign qualifications or even foreign students?

OUC Response:
The Open University of Cyprus is an open & distance learning university with open admissions, thus it aspires to provide prospective students that meet the minimum admissions criteria for UG and PG programmes of study the opportunity to enrol in higher education programmes. To enrol in an undergraduate programme, students must possess a high school diploma ("apolyterion"), while to enrol in a Master's degree programme, students must have a Bachelor's degree from a recognized university. To apply for a Ph.D. programme, students must have a Master's degree in a relevant field.

KYSATS (http://www.kysats.ac.cy/index.php/en/home) is the competent authority of the Republic of Cyprus for the recognition of higher education qualifications, awarded by recognized institutions of higher education or by evaluated-accredited study programmes by the competent authorities of the country they operate or offered in.
It also acts as the Education National Information Centre. KYSATS recognises qualifications, such as degrees, diplomas or certificates which are issued by recognised Higher Education Institutions or by institutions, the programmes of which have been educationally evaluated-accredited. The reference of evaluation for the recognition of titles awarded are the titles (degrees) awarded by public universities of Cyprus in the same discipline and the titles awarded by State Higher Education Institutions of Cyprus.

As far as other admission criteria are concerned, for English-taught Programmes of Study candidates must have a very good knowledge of the English language in order to be able to attend successfully the programme. Thus, one of the admissions criteria is certificate of the English language which corresponds to a degree of 5.5 IELTS or equivalent based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR).

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How is there a balance between theory and practice, for graduate students who do not work and cannot apply what they learn in their workplace? There should be an opportunity for these students to go to a workplace sometimes in semester as part of the course, in order to put into practice the theoretical background they are learning.

OUC Response:
Thank you for the above point which we consider as being very important. Based on our experience from the offering of the University's MA in Educational Studies, and especially the academic direction in Educational Leadership and Policy, which is already offered in the Greek language, the majority of students are professionals in educational institutions seeking for additional knowledge and skills. Thus, we do expect that demand for this Programme will largely rely on working people, who have the capacity and opportunities to link theory and practice in their workplace.

The MA students, who choose to do so, can have professional engagement with the field of adult education through practical training in organizations in Cyprus facilitated by the Liaison Office of the Open University of Cyprus (OUC). This is operating since 2016 in the context of the project "University Liaison Offices with the Business World" and it is co-funded by the European Social Fund. It is engaged in promoting the systematic communication and cooperation of the scientific/research and student community with all sectors of the economy, to take advantage of the research and to decode entrepreneurship. In order to achieve this goal, the Liaison Office assists in the process of placement of students in businesses and organisations, with the aim of acquiring a first contact with the professional world or furthering their experience and improving their working skills. Thus, students of the MA in Educational Leadership and Policy can take advantage of these opportunities and undertake internships in organizations in Cyprus. Students have the opportunity to participate in two placement cycles in different institutions. Each student who successfully completes his/her placement receives three credits which –however- are not taken into account in his/her degree requirement courses.

Moreover, students have the opportunity to apply for an Erasmus+ funding in the context of the Erasmus+ Mobility Programme and undertake an internship in organizations abroad. Students, with the end of their practical training, submit a reflective piece of work about their internship experiences to the MA.

Furthermore, for the majority of the students who do not choose to undertake practical training, as they are working adults, this opportunity is given to them throughout the Thematic Units/Courses offered, in which theory and practice are interlinked. In the Study Guides of all the Thematic Units and also on the University's eLearning Platform there are a number of examples and case studies, which are expected to be further enriched by the experiences of the students and the individual and group work that they will undertake. Most of the activities are of a more practical and applied nature in which students are encouraged to use their own experiences, and link them to the theoretical knowledge they gain in the different modules.

Graduates of this new Master's Programme in 'Educational Leadership and Policy' can be gainfully employed as officers at Ministries of Education; Educational regional offices; school principals; deputy school principals; school inspectors; educational policy officers/advisers; officers at banking institutions' educational centers, etc.

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5. Resources
(ESG 1.6)

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.

In general

The available teaching and learning resources must fit the teaching and learning model of the university. Briefly described, they are as follows. The university:

- provides modular courses to mainly adult students (average 37 years old) in a semester system that can be studied within the context of a degree programme or as a single course for lifelong learners,
- offers the courses using flexible distance teaching facilities,
- uses a single, well maintained, digital learning environment (eClass) that is used for all its online education. eClass provides a unified digital learning environment that is composed of the different digital synchronous and asynchronous communication facilities and digital resources that are required to deliver high quality distance education,
- Uses, besides eClass, other communication media like telephone, email and face-to-face contact to communicate with students and tutors,
- puts effort into the selection and training of tutors who are able to teach at a distance, using the infrastructure of the OUC,
- has exam centres in Cyprus, Greece and other places for the final examinations where the student's physical presence is required.
- Students are very positive about the social interaction that is organised. In this way they do not feel isolated, as is the case with some other distance teaching institutions. Also the teaching staff is very approachable and willing to help them.

Standards: Teaching and Learning resources

- *Weekly interactive activities per each course are set.*

The university sets standards for the interactive activities for every course. Required are 10 activities per semester (14 weeks incl. exams). The kind of interaction is not described, this is up to the individual tutors to decide. Activities can vary from essays, simulations, serious games to short quizzes. Important elements of this provision are providing feedback, working in small groups and stimulating discussions between students so that they are engaged constantly.

- *The e-learning material and activities take advantage of the capabilities offered by the virtual and audio-visual environment.*

Although most digital facilities for courses are still in development, during the visit it was mentioned that the team was aiming at the development of simulations and games, case studies and role-play. This development needs the support of the limited number of available resources at the university for

pedagogical and technical support, so it could take time for the full implementation of these aspects of the programme.

- *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.*

Teachers are supported, through the UOC Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab, to develop educational materials for their online courses and helps them to solve pedagogical design issues during course development. An issue is that only a limited number of staff is available for all the programmes of the university, e.g. 3 interactive designers. A priority list has been drawn up, but it could take a considerable time before this programme gets the support it needs for its full implementation.

- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*

There are some facilities that are dependent on student numbers, e.g. the number of computer(s) (rooms) for research methods courses using SPSS with tutor guidance. A room has 20-30 computers. When more computers are needed the number of rooms used can be increased, and, in cases of urgency, there is the possibility of using the facilities of the University of Cyprus.

- *All resources are fit for purpose.*

This seems to be the case.

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

Students have a lot of flexibility in tempo, within certain boundaries (e.g. max. 6 years for a master's programme) and the programme is able to cope with the planning issues derived from this flexibility.

Standards: Physical resources

- *Physical resources, i.e. premises, libraries, study facilities, IT infrastructure, are adequate to support the study programme.*

From the documentation and the site visit we learned that the university has adequate and readily available resources that are required for a distance teaching university, considering that students are not working on campus but at various locations, like their home or work. With respect to the library, there is a joint effort on the part of all three universities; students can access all the major journals for this programme. With respect to the IT infrastructure: the university maintains its own data centre with the required security and redundancy. Facilities for face-to-face classes, including computer rooms, are available.

Standards: Human support resources

- *Human support resources, i.e. tutors/mentors, counsellors, other advisers, qualified administrative staff, are adequate to support the study programme.*

The human support resources that are available at the university for this program are adequate and can be adapted to changing needs of the programme.

Standards: Student support

- *Students well supported, given their different backgrounds.*

Distance teaching universities have to deal with a very heterogenous student population, not only in age, but also prior knowledge and experience. At the UOC, students are well supported and informed. A good indicator of the adequacy of student support is the student retention rate (or its opposite, the dropout rate). The university reports 5% dropout. This is very low in comparison to other distance teaching universities. This is partly due to the way in which dropout is calculated (for a master's programme students who do not finish within 6 years are counted as dropouts), but is also attributed to the flexibility students have in their planning, and the intensive interaction that is provided to engage students. On average, students attain between 15-30 ECTS per study year in the university.

With respect to course support, all tutors are available 3 hours per week for students in general. Tutors have to be available for students during these 3 hours, and in addition students can make individual appointments with them.

The number of tutors available is planned by the university. Each new programme starts with a limited number of students and is expanded gradually. The standard is to have 5 – 30 students per tutor. When the number of students grows, new tutors are recruited.

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

- Adequate learning environment and learning resources, especially the eClass facility and the joint library facilities.
- Adequate pedagogical approach to engage students on a weekly basis with interactive activities. Students are very satisfied with this.

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 number of interaction designers (3) and their limited availability for the programme is an issue. The EEC recommends increasing these resources and making at least one FTE interaction designers available for the programme the coming year. Otherwise the ambition to produce simulations, games and self-assessment tests are not feasible.

OUC Response:
We do appreciate the fact that the EEC commented positively on the Learning Resources and Student Support of the Open University of Cyprus.

The Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology (LEMM) envisions to contributing in enhancing the distance learning student experience. Using cutting-edge technology tools and following the principles of modern and result-driven educational methodologies, it promotes and ensures the high quality of educational material and the achievement of academic excellence. The Laboratory's mission focuses on the continuous monitoring, development, assessment and update of the educational material and the educational methodology of the Open University of Cyprus, in alignment with the University's vision. In collaboration with other OUC units and services, LEMM's mission is to contribute to the University's work by providing high quality material according to the needs of the modern student.

We do agree with the Committee's comment that the current capacity of the Lab, i.e. three university officers, is limited and should be enhanced. This is however not a decision that can be taken easily, as the Open University of Cyprus is a public University and all permanent administrative staff positions need to be approved by the competent Ministries of Education and Finance. OUC is constantly pushing the relevant Ministries for more administrative positions in critical areas, such as instructional design.

Given that the Programme under evaluation is a New Masters, commitment of resources is ensured to develop suitable educational material and interactive educational activities to support students and the Programme overall.
Moreover, there are plans to visit (Covid measures permitting) Israel in the very near future in order to begin our collaboration with the Digital Media Lab at the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University, where Team based simulation (TBS) among educational leaders will be jointly developed. Already, the correspondence between our two institutions is well-developed and we are only awaiting travel permissions based on the Covid situation.

The drop-out number seems to be very low at 5%. However, the calculation used is also very liberal and atypical, and does not give a good (international) comparative overview of the actual dropout and retention. The recommendation is to report on a yearly basis the number of ECTS attained by the students, not only as an average, but also as a histogram. The students who attained near 0 ECTS can be categorised as dropouts. It could be that they restart their study the following year, but these should then be categorised as restarters after an interruption.

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OUC Response:

The mechanism for collecting and analysing data and indicators needed to effectively design the Department's academic development is indeed not entirely adequate and this is still room for improvement. For each Programme of Study, we use the eLearning Platform, the Student Information System, and the ERP System to gather data on dropout rates, graduation rates, new students' enrolment rates, and degrees awarded, etc. Moreover, gathering data on alumni, their employability and how they used the degrees received by the Open University of Cyprus can further enhance the yearly reviews of all existing Programmes of Study.

6. Additional for distance learning programmes
   (ALL ESG)

No additional comments made by the External Evaluation Committee

7. Additional for doctoral programmes
   (ALL ESG)

Not applicable

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8. Additional for joint programmes
   (ALL ESG)

Not applicable

B. 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.

by the External Evaluation Committee

The EEC is appreciative of the warm welcome received from the Open University of Cyprus rector and staff, and of the time taken to prepare and present us with extensive information on the new programme, and to address our questions.

The committee concludes that the notion of a master's programme in educational leadership and policy, delivered in English, as proposed, is sound; it would cover an area of knowledge not currently covered by the OUC's taught programmes – an area that features as the subject of hundreds of taught programmes in universities worldwide. Particularly pleasing is the intended focus on applying research-derived knowledge to professional practice.

All the evidence that the EEC gleaned suggests that the OUC has an extremely strong record of student nurturing and emotional support, and the proposed programme will undoubtedly follow this well-established model of excellence in student welfare.

In terms of the programme's design and delivery – including its proposed curriculum – the EEC urges the OUC to extend its teaching team to include tutors (whether of adjunct, visiting or even permanent status) who undertake, and could disseminate, through the courses, cutting-edge research in the field that incorporates consideration of critical leadership studies, leader-scepticism, and different models of leadership presented from a culturally responsive viewpoint. Such recruitment of additional teaching team members could make significant contributions towards transforming what is in many respects a 20th century curriculum (as it is currently proposed) into one that reflects 21st century research and scholarship that is global in focus, rather than narrowly Anglo-American, in the (educational) leadership field; moreover, recruiting more women academics would not only help even out a gender imbalance among the teaching team, but would also convey to students the message that leadership is not the domain of men only. **Increasing the number of e-learning support staff,** too – specifically, interaction designers - would enhance programme delivery by facilitating the introduction onto the programme of innovative learning approaches involving simulations and games, and self-assessment tests.

by the Open University of Cyprus

First and foremost, we would kindly like to express our gratitude to the External Evaluation Committee (EEC), both for the constructive comments during our online evaluation meeting, and for the detailed written feedback provided in its evaluation report. The EEC's insights on the programme adds credit to it, given the substantial reputation and expertise of its members in the fields of Educational Leadership and Policy. We greatly appreciate the EEC's positive feedback, expressed throughout the evaluation report, and highlighted particularly at the concluding part: "… the master's programme in educational leadership and policy, delivered in English, as proposed, is sound… Particularly pleasing is the intended focus on applying research-derived knowledge to professional practice". Concerning student support, we appreciate made by the Committee that: "the OUC has an extremely strong record of student nurturing and emotional support, and the proposed programme will undoubtedly follow this well-established model of excellence in student welfare". We do aspire that the establishment of the Programme in "Educational Leadership and Policy" that will be offered in English is a distance learning programme can attract students from all over the world, and thus could be a major contribution to the efforts of the government of Cyprus to make our country a Regional Research and Education Centre.

We value the recommendations made by the EEC the purpose being to improve aspects of the Programme under evaluation, and the academic and administrative team of the Open University of Cyprus have jointly worked to address the points raised by the Committee. As you already saw, our response was structured as follows: under the separate headings identified in the external evaluation report, the EEC's comments (findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations) are reported; these are followed by our responses to all the points identified.

In short, and based on the overall recommendations:

- Bibliography of all Thematic Units has been updated to reflect up-to-date theoretical approaches and related research findings and trends.
- The Programme will invite distinguished speakers (academics, researchers and practitioners) from various countries for guest lectures, thus providing students of the Programme the opportunity to learn from frameworks, processes and practices of different geographical regions.
- The Programme will also seek to recruit international scholars and researchers as Adjunct Faculty (Tutors). Adjunct faculty (Tutors) is hired on private-law contracts of limited duration with the possibility of renewal, to cover specific teaching and / or research needs. For English-taught Programmes the Call for Applications is published in English and is disseminated through various recruitment portals, thus academics from various foreign universities can apply for such positions.
- Attracting foreign tutors, but as well as inviting distinguished acadmics and resaerchers from various countries to undertake guest lectures as part of the Programme's content, will allow for the dissemination of cutting-edge research across Modules and will allow presenting different models of leadership from a culturally responsive viewpoint.
- The University will continue to push the competent Ministries of Education and Finance for additional permanent academic and administrative staff positions in critical areas, such as instructional design.

In closing, the Open University of Cyprus and the Academic Team of the M.A. Programme in "Educational Leadership and Policy", would like to thank the external evaluation committee (EEC) for the very positive reception of the newly proposed Programme. The remarks, suggestions and recommendations of the EEC were very constructive and thoughtful, significantly supporting our efforts to launch an English-taught Programme in these fields in the best possible way. All concerns of the EEC have been considered and addressed by the Open University of Cyprus. We are looking forward to a positive decision by the CYQAA regarding the accreditation of the Programme so that the OUC can launch it in the next academic year.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Professor Petros Pashiardis	Rector, Academic Coordinator of the Programme under Evaluation	
Professor Michalinos Zembylas	Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management	
Professor Yannis Manolopoulos	Vice-Rector, Chairman of the Institutional Quality Assurance Committee	
Erato Ioanna Sarri	Coordinating Officer of the Institution's Quality Assurance Office	

Date: 1/2/2021

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