Doc. 300.1.2

Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: 11/06/2021

- **Higher Education Institution:** Open University of Cyprus
- **Town:** Nicosia
- **Programme of study Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)**

  In Greek:

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

  In English:

  MSc Environmental Conservation and Management (120 ECTS)
- **Language(s) of instruction:** Greek
- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating
- **Concentrations (if any):**
  In Greek: 1. Ενέργεια και Ρύπανση, 2. Διαχείριση και Προστασία Χερσαίων Οικοσυστημάτων
  In English: 1. Energy and Pollution, 2. Terrestrial Ecosystem Conservation and Management

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 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4) 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 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 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4).*

- *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, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

Findings

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

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

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

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

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

employer seem to be kept. A lot of experience based knowledge in the heads of the two core faculty members exists and is used (most likely often implicitly) in regularly refinement and the current large redevelopment of the Programme.

Strengths

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

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations

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

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

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

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

OUC RESPONSE

Student representation in various levels of university life is under discussion at the top management level, since currently this is not included in the law governing the operation of the Open University of Cyprus. Once this is resolved, i.e. Student Union can be formed, the University will consider

introducing at Programme level the role of student representative as suggested by the Committee i.e. a student who will be elected by her/his peers.

As noted by the Committee, the Programme's Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) are detailed and clustered according to the Bloom Taxonomy. The summarized version of ILOs as presented during the Committee's online visit is now submitted (Appendix) as requested.

Concerning the comment made by the Committee regarding the diversity of background of students applying and/or enrolling in the programme, we would like to note that this data is recorded in the Student Information System (SIS) used by the University and will be used by the programme and the Faculty to monitor students backgrounds. More specifically, when people apply for enrolment, they give information on past educational experience, employment status, etc.

Given that this is a new Programme of Study in terms of overall structure (restructuring for semester course) we opted to continue with the existing two specializations (1. Energy and Pollution, 2. Terrestrial Ecosystem Conservation and Management) and have them tested for a couple of years in this new structure before introducing any new specialisation. This will also give sufficient time to fine tune the whole Programme and consider the feasibility of including new elective modules, perhaps from other faculties (e.g. Faculty of Economic Sciences & Management for courses on Environmental Economics and Environmental Law), which although are now available it remains unclear internally how resources will be managed between faculties. Both of these suggestions by the reviewers i.e. an additional (or different specializations) plus interfaculty elective courses will be the starting points for the next internal review of this new Programme.

2. Student – centred learning, teaching and assessment
(ESG 1.3)

Findings

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

The virtual learning environment (eClass) integrates various tools to present information and course content, to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous interaction and communication (Blackboard Collaborate, Moodle), to create video content (lecture capture), to support student assessment and to offer all kinds of administrative student support and counselling services.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feedback is provided on a regular basis during the courses using the communication tools in Moodle as well as self-study questions and quizzes that are automatically graded for immediate feedback. Instructors offer a weekly synchronous tutorial that is not mandatory and recorded so that students who could not participate can watch the video recording later. Faculty members encourage students to post course related questions also in the asynchronous forums so that all students benefit from the discussion. However, the conferences on eClass are not heavily used, probably because most questions are sorted out during the synchronous tutorial sessions.

Strengths

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

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

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations

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

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

OUC RESPONSE

The use of Synchronous weekly videoconferences serves as a means to keep motivate students on a regular basis and keep track of their progress in a more structured manner. These also serve to answer any questions students may have on the curriculum. Although not mandatory, these seem to be appreciated by students who feel the need to have frequent contact with their instructor/teacher and their peers.

As already demonstrated during the Committee's virtual visit the OUC eLearning platform holds a large number of video-lectures and lab exercises, while synchronous lectures are video-recorded and are accessible to the students throughout the academic year. There are also activities, which are done via asynchronous discussions in moodle.

Regarding "presence activities" which are actually non-mandatory, as explained already during the virtual visit of the committee, these are actually recorded and become available to everyone on the eClass platform. Thus all students have equal access to all synchronous and asynchronous tutorials, activities, discussions. In addition, where there are two cohorts of the same module/course, which are geographically separated (i.e. in Cyprus vs Greece) parallel activities of the same nature, are offered to both.

3. Teaching staff

(ESG 1.5)

Findings

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

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

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

Courses and instructors are evaluated annually by the students and the relevant university committees, and in a few cases (at the university level) contracts have been terminated. The renewal of contract is thus based on thorough examinations, and much more so than at an average, campus-based university. According to the rector, the university is in general very satisfied with the quality of the candidates for these positions.

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

Faculty members receive training in distant learning methods, and are also being supported by the Laboratory of Educational Material & Methodology (LEMM). In addition, there is an educational Technology Research Lab, which helps to develop distance-learning tools, such as simulation ‘games’. All faculty members have relevant education, are active researchers and are also involved in practical or policy applications, and thus have a relevant background for their teaching.

In general, having more temporary/adjunct faculty members than permanent faculty members is far from ideal for programme development, coherence across courses, quality assurance and

continuity. Yet, the impression we get is that the adjunct faculty members are well integrated into the Programme, for example, by also being involved in Master thesis supervision. One of the four teaches two courses.

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

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

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

Strengths

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

Examples from own research are being used in the courses.

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

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations

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

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

OUC RESPONSE

We do share the EEC's opinion that all Programmes of Study should have an adequate number of permanent academic staff, and not rely so heavily on adjunct faculty members, i.e. Tutors. This is however, the case for the OUC that is a public University and all faculty positions (Lecturers, Assistant Professors, Associate Professors and Professors) need to be approved by the competent Ministries of Education and Finance. Thus, the University is highly depending on Adjunct Tutors for teaching in the majority of student cohorts. Since OUC is a member of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), this is the case in other Open Universities as far as we know. The Programme, the relevant Faculty and the University overall, are meticulous in ascertaining that, by way of a fair point system that balances experience and motivation, Adjunct Faculty of the highest caliber are hired every year, and depending on their evaluation, their contracts are renewed.
Regarding the issue of potential successors we agree with the Committee, and have sought to encourage the adjunct faculty members (AFMs) to engage a) in the decision-making, b) in research at OUC. Currently 2/4 Tutors of the Programme under evaluation are engaged in projects as members of the OUC team while there are several research proposals under evaluation which included AFMs. In addition, a recent decision of the OUC Senate/Council has now formalized their involvement in research activities i.e. AFMs are now entitled to apply independently for grants, they can get office space in the existing labs as well as logistic support. Future academic appointments clearly depend the University's strategic plan on which the Programme has limited influence. The University is constantly putting pressure on the relevant Ministries for more academic positions.

Regarding the comment made by the Committee to create more opportunities to involve students in research projects, we would like to inform you that a small number of students have been involved in the past either on a paid or voluntary basis in research conducted by the Programme's two Research Labs, i.e. Terrestrial Ecosystems Management Lab, and Lab of Chemical Engineering and Environmental Sustainability. These were usually students not employed or in part time employment who are the minority of the students attending the MSc. As pointed out also during the virtual visit 90% of our students are in full-time employment, which makes the whole venture more complicated. Still, such opportunities do exist and are offered to master students.

4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
(ESG 1.4)

Findings

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

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

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

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

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

Strengths

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations

It would be useful to direct future some efforts to better define specific regulations along the path from admission and certification. For example, one may assess the prior learning in admission, to suggest possibly preparation / education debts. Further, the course could consider the possibility to recognise a small number of ECTs for extra-curricular or non-formal / informal activities.
There is scope for improvements of the performance data about the course, e.g. on students' background and how that relates to pass rate or successful or drop out. The programme did not present any information system to automatically monitor student performance, while the indications provided during the interviews to supervise the learning process in general seem to be available and used as tacit knowledge by the two core faculty members.

OUC RESPONSE

Recognition of prior studies (formal learning) is in place and descripted in the Internal Study Regulations of the Open University of Cyprus. For public universities in Cyprus there are no regulations -for the time being- about the recognition of informal prior learning. We do agree with the Committee in its recommendation to consider the possibility to recognise some ECTS units for extra-curriculum activities, and we the Programme's academic team plans to start moving along this way by providing Certificates of Attendance of the Programme's annual Seminar series which would count towards 5 ECTS. This is currently pending a discussion and a formal approval by the University Studies Committee and the Senate.

Following the Committee's suggestion as of this current academic year, we are putting in place such a system to monitor dropouts in a systematic manner and we will send a suggestion to the University Studies Committee to adopt a consistent system at the University level.

As far as automatic monitoring system of performance this is something that has to be done centrally and incorporated into the University's eLearning Platform e-class (together with learning analytics). Following the Committee's recommendation, we will convey a suggestion to the relevant Support departments (i.e. ICT and Students & Programmes Support Unit) to centralize such an operation.

5. Learning resources and student support

(ESG 1.6)

Findings

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

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

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

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

Only the final exams are place in a physical location.

One faculty member or tutor is responsible for supporting one cohort or class section of students with a maximum number of 30 participants which is appropriate to facilitate an interactive and personal relationship between the instructors and students as well as among the students.
The students enrolled in the programme represent a typical student profile of an open and distance teaching university: 90 % of the students in the programme are currently employed who can bring in their professional experience. The drop-out rate is relatively low for a DL program.

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

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

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

Strengths

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

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

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

Areas of improvement and recommendations

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

The Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab (LEMM) has to grow in terms of human and financial resources to provide professional and high quality services in professional

development training for faculty members, course development, instructional design and learning material production. The current resources are far too limited.

We strongly support that newly hired faculty members and tutors will need to mandatorily take the professional development training courses offered by LEMM if they do not have this kind of qualification or cannot prove otherwise that they possess the required skills and experience to teach online at a distance (as planned from September 2021).

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

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

OUC RESPONSE

Regarding the Educational Methodology & Educational Material Lab (LEMM) we agree with the Committee but it is beyond the power of the MSc Programme. The recommendation has been conveyed to Senior Management, and our University's Rectorate is putting pressure on the competent Ministries of Education and Finance for new administrative positions. Moreover, budget allocation for the continuous professional development of the university's faculty and adjunct faculty in regards to course development, instructional design and learning material production, is addressed by the University's top management.

The two training courses already offered to faculty members and adjunct tutors will be mandatory:

1. Use of the University's eLearning Platform

This course is offered asynchronously throughout the academic year and it is provided and supported by the University's ICT Unit. Its content includes: asynchronous platform, synchronous platform, video platform, plagiarism detection tools, and collaboration tools for teachers-staff interaction.

2. Distance teaching, learning and assessment

This course is provided by the University's Lab for Educational Material and Methodology (LEMM) and has a 12-weeks duration. Its objective is to inform OUC's teaching staff for the latest methods and practices regarding online teaching, learning and assessment. Moreover, it allows teaching staff to become familiarized with the synchronous and asynchronous collaboration and communication tools provided in the eLearning Platform and procedures to develop interactive activities and suitable multi-format educational. Its content includes: theoretical models of adult learning and methods to design and measure learning outcomes, distance learning interactive assignments, how to create

successfully video lectures, methods and techniques to engage students in the learning process, strategies to design suitable assessment methods and provide constructive feedback to students.

This is now common practice and 2 out of 4 adjunct faculty members (tutors) of the MSc in Environmental Conservation and Management have completed these courses this semester while the other two will attend them during next semester. In addition, skills to teaching online at a distance is part of the criteria used for employment or re-employment of adjunct faculty staff. Candidates for Adjunct Faculty are assessed according to the following criteria:

- Relevance of their research and teaching experience to the Thematic Unit (module) they apply to.
- Overall academic teaching experience in the last five years.
- Distance learning teaching experience in the last five years and ability to use state-of-the-art technology.
- Availability of the candidate, as evidenced by a signed declaration of commitments to employers other than OUC.
- The candidate's evaluations as Tutor at the Open University of Cyprus (if applicable) over the last five years.

Regarding the learning analytics system this should be also implemented at the University level for which the MSc will comply once set up, since we clearly see the need for such action.

As far as the OER are concerned we are already using a number of OER including textbooks, open access journals on https://doaj.org, open MOOCs, software (freeware such as FRAGSTATS HARVESTLITE, ILWIS, QGIS). We believe this was not conveyed as strongly as it should by the MSc Teaching Staff during the Committee's virtual visit.

6. Additional for doctoral programmes
(ALL ESG)

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7. Eligibility (Joint programme)
(ALL ESG)

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B. Conclusions and final remarks

Conclusions and final remarks

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

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

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

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

Realizing the difficulties of engaging DL students beyond the standard end-of-course evaluation in the quality assurance process, we would still encourage to do so in the future. We also did not hear

of an organized way of using the experiences of alumni (during and after their time in the Programme) in both fine tuning the Programme, and even 'selling it' to prospective students.
The MSc Environmental Conservation and Management (120 ECTS) serves, in the eyes of the panel (EEC), a clear purpose and is well designed for that, and is embedded in the supportive structure of the OUC (which is already attuned to the job of DL, and furthering itself in it). The success is also clearly based on the more tacit knowledge and experience with the two core staff members. A process to document/formalize much of this should be started, also to avoid the collapse in case one of them would no longer be available.

OUC RESPONSE

First and foremost, we would like to express our gratitude to the External Evaluation Committee (EEC), both for the constructive comments during our online meeting, and for the detailed written feedback and recommendations in this evaluation report. Our response is 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.

We do appreciate the view expressed by the Committee, that this Programme is "a very interesting and relevant programme that serves a specific niche, both in Cyprus and Greece". We do believe that the additional courses, e.g. courses on climate change challenges, will add to the relevance and the demand for the restructured semestrial Programme, which is expected to attract increased number of students.

The EEC commented that "for the four adjunct staff the panel met during the online visit, however, there seems to be some bias towards the more natural science side of environmental management (at least in their original trainings)". Our response to this comment is that although the original training of the teaching staff members is closer to the nature science side of environmental management this is mainly a reflection of the applications received, the criteria employed for appointing staff but also the structure of the Programme as it has been until now i.e. with annual (year-long) modules instead of semester ones. It is envisaged that the range of modules offered under the new structure will attract diverse interested candidates including environmental economists. Synergies are actively sought with other courses and Faculties within the University, which will provide more options for the students and economies of scale for the University. However, this is still under formalization since the details of such a venture is not yet clear, particularly as far as resource allocation and management between faculties is concerned.

Concerning the comment made by the Committee about the gender mix among the teaching staff: We recognize gender balance as an issue but again this is partly a reflection of the academia in Greece and Cyprus where OUC mainly recruits from. The Open University of Cyprus is committed to an Equal Opportunities Policy in relation to hiring and supporting the career development of all people, and encourages individuals, irrespective of gender or gender reassignment, to apply for

academic, research and administrative job openings. The Open University of Cyprus does not discriminate on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, colour, religion or belief, gender, gender reassignment, ethnicity, nationality, age, disability, marriage or civil partnership, or sexual orientation in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations of the Republic of Cyprus. Thus, and although the University is an equal opportunity employer, there is no policy to date which encourages the employment of women over men candidates or the appointment of a percentage of women candidates in teaching posts.

The University considers the presence and development of the Educational Material and Methodology Lab (LEMM) an important asset and seeks to support its growth in terms of human and financial resources. The University will continue to put pressure on the competent Ministries of Education and Finance for additional permanent academic and administrative staff positions in critical areas, such as instructional design.

Lastly, with regards to the comment made by the Committee to use in a more organized manner the experiences of alumni, we would like to add the following:

Every year during the admissions period, all OUC programmes use the experiences of a number of alumni to promote the programmes.

In closing, the Open University of Cyprus and the Academic Team of the MSc in “Environmental Conservation and Management” would like to thank the external evaluation committee (EEC) for the very positive reception of our postgraduate degree. The remarks, suggestions and recommendations of the EEC were very constructive and thoughtful, significantly supporting our efforts to restructure the Programme in the best possible way. We are looking forward to a positive decision by the CYQAA regarding the accreditation of a programme that is being offered since the 2011-2012 academic year, with regular revisions, as per the recommendations of the EEC.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	*Position*	*Signature*
Prof. Ioannis Vogiatzakis	Faculty, MSc in Environmental Conservation and Management	[redacted]
Associate Professor Antonis Zorpas	Academic Coordinator of the MSc in Environmental Conservation and Management	
Professor Yannis Manolopoulos	Chair of the Internal Quality Assurance Committee	
Erato Ioanna Sarri	Coordinating Officer of the Quality Assurance Office	
Click to enter Name	Click to enter Position	
Click to enter Name	Click to enter Position	

Date: 11/06/2021

MSc in Environmental Conservation and Management
Annex I

MAIN LEARNING OUTCOMES

Knowledge

- recognize the dynamics of environmental systems and the challenges they face.
- describe the main anthropogenic activities that pollute the environment, and their impact on ecosystems.
- describe the structure and function of ecosystems and in the Mediterranean.
- describe the energy NEXUS issues
- distinguish and understand the basic concepts of conservation and management of natural resources.
- distinguish and understand basic genres of research and research methodology (Stats techniques & methods.

Comprehension

- Explain the impacts of climate change and land use change on natural resources.
- Understand the historical evolution of environmental strategies at global and European level.
- employ basic statistical techniques and methods.
- interpret correctly the results of statistical analysis.
- identify the appropriate tools, depending on the nature of each environmental problem, in order to propose solutions
- utilize methods of planning, development and evaluation of research projects and environmental assessments.
- Understand the need for a spatial approach to environmental problems.

Application

- use an interdisciplinary approach and apply the knowledge and skills that they have acquired to tackle complex environmental problems and be able to propose solutions to those problems.
- apply modern methods of environmental assessment and protection.
- explain the main stages of scientific research and be able to apply research methodology to environmental projects.
- apply criteria and metrics (quantitative and qualitative) to such an extent that it allows them to plan and design projects.

- utilize the skills they have acquired in dealing with environment issues at research and / or academic level (if in pursuit of a PhD)
- use specialized environmental data analysis software and be able to explain the results of these analyzes.

ANALYSIS

- Proposed holistic approach and to develop waste strategies
- design environmental impact studies, species and habitat monitoring plans
- analyze environmental data using specialized software.
- identify the challenges associated with natural resources protection and be able to work out proposed solutions.
- Prepare high standard scientific work (including, literature review, date review and analysis).
- Analyze the characteristics of the natural and anthropogenic environment and links to natural resources conservation
- analyze, the appropriate legislation (national, EU) relevant to any environmental issue.

SYNTHESIS

- combine their work experience and enrich it with current trends in environmental management
- design scientific research, combining appropriate theories with modern research methods, thereby generating new knowledge.
- develop waste reduction practices and propose waste management plans at regional and central level.
- link the theory of conservation biology and terrestrial ecosystem management with practice
- collect and manage environmental data by applying the appropriate case-by-case method
- communicate in a succinct manner information on environmental issues and present them in written and oral form.

Evaluation

- assess the role of environmental science in natural resources management.
- assess the impacts of major human activities on natural resources.
- evaluate different design methodologies for Protected Areas.
- evaluate the use of alternative approaches in statistical analysis.
- evaluate the capabilities of different tools in solving environmental problems.
- assess the data requirements of the various techniques used in statistics.
- critically review the results of the data analysis (quantitative or qualitative) of environmental and research studies and projects