Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 01/06/2021

07.14.318.053

Higher Education Institution's Response

- **Higher Education Institution:**
  Frederick University
- **Town: -**
- **School: Business and Law**
- **Department: Maritime Transport and Commerce**
- **Programme(s) of study under evaluation Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)**

Programme

In Greek:

Διεθνές Εμπόριο και Ναυτιλιακή Διοίκηση (3 ακαδημαϊκά εξάμηνα, 90 ECTS, Μάστερ (MSc), Εξ αποστάσεως)

In English:

International Trade and Shipping Management (3 academic semesters, 90 ECTS, Master (MSc), Distance Learning)

Language(s) of instruction: English

Programme's Status: Currently Operating

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.300.3.1) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the department 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. 300.3.1).*

- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

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

   (ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

Areas of improvement and recommendations

> 1.a. The committee observed that the intake of the own BSc students into the MSc is limited. Nevertheless, the BSc students should be a relevant stream in the intake of the MSc program, even if this is after a few years in the industry.

It is noted that a total of 18 masters graduates were our own BSc graduates. Taking the total graduates of our MSc until now, conventional as well as distance learning, this number approximates to 20% of the total number of graduates. The Department has been focusing on the promotion of the MSc programme in order to secure a more diverse student body, with the highest possible academic achievement, while, at the same time, encouraging our top graduates to apply. We accept that the percentage of MSc population from fresh graduates of the BSc is low but this is attributed to a significant extent to the high employability rates of our BSc graduates, making most preferring direct employment than furthering their studies.

> 1.b. The committee would also like to point out that the viability and potential of the MSc program will be greatly enhanced with the increase in the research content. After all, this is an MSc degree and the research part should be at the core of the curriculum. This will also enhance the skillset of graduates and will enable them to progress to higher level managerial positions.

Emphasis is given to the active involvement and contribution of students to research, to a greater degree than hitherto. The establishment of the Research unit of the Department and the appointment of the currently employed research coordinator as well as the full subscription to the Clarkson's database are seen as vital to enhance the effort of strengthening the research component of the programme and giving further attention to student's dissertations. Furthermore, a clear guidance and tracked goal setting towards presenting research work from MSc theses in local and international conferences will boost the research culture in Department.

In addition to physical resources improvements, maybe more importantly, is the provision of an improved environment in relation to human resources. The Department has raised the

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issue with the management and a series of university-wide measures has been suggested to further improve the research culture and output. These measures include:

- The establishment of an internal research funding scheme to support and kickstart research initiative, especially by newly employed and relatively low research engagement academic staff
- A teaching load reduction scheme for faculty that engage in research and produce high-impact research publications and/or engage in funded research projects
- Increase of research account funds to all faculty for participation in conferences and research networking events

In addition to the above measures that apply to all departments, the following additional measures have been suggested:

- Employment of promising alumni with interest in research for supporting research work
- Approval of budget for a senior visiting professor scheme that will allow experienced professors from established universities to take residency for a period (usually during the sabbatical) at the Department in order to seed research activities

> 1.c. Finally, the learning outcomes in the module specifications need to be streamlined and modified to reflect the learnings objectives of an MSc degree. It is recommended to revise the entire structure of intended learning outcomes for the program as a whole and all the underlying courses, stick to a hierarchical taxonomy, and reduce the number of ILOs overall.

The Department adopts the recommendations of the EEC. Please refer to **Annex 1** for the revised coursed descriptions.

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

All areas marked as compliant

Areas of improvement and recommendations

> 2.a. The committee recommends giving a greater role to the research that is carried out by students in their theses. Various teaching faculty have indicated they use some of this material in their classes, but this has an informal character. We recommend that the course management team provides an annual review of thesis topics and research results achieved in MSc thesis projects that should be made available at Departmental level.

In response to recommendations in this section, the intent of the Department is to monitor and depict the current trends in shipping research so that the annual review of thesis topics, which takes place periodically, is updated and disseminated to MSc students. A formal mechanism is employed to monitor research results and opportunities for academic publication of students and their supervisors. Currently, the research themes addressed at the latest available IAME conference have been used to review new topics, which supervisors are to evaluate and involve students via the Dpt.'s dissertation module.

Much emphasis is given on the access of students to specialized shipping databases, such as the Clarkson's database, that it is available to all. Subscription to a further dedicated maritime databank (Tradeviews) has also been made and will become available from the current academic year. A plan is in place to create a formal mechanism for informing, disseminating, allocating and evaluating contemporary research topics to MSc Students. Also, specifying the presentation of theses in academic conferences as a performance indicator to be tracked by the Department will boost focus and output to this end.

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> **2.b.** The EEC considers that onsite final exams may not be in line with the learning style of online students, and formative continuous assessment during the course could be reinforced instead.

We are ensuring that students opting for the distance learning program are assessed by appropriate means and methodologies suited for this mode of delivery. For the final examination for example, the exams are open book exams so that critical thinking is encouraged. Additionally, assessment forms such as take home exams and oral exams can be used. Various forms of assessment are used for coursework as part of the formative assessment. However, the existence of face-to-face final examinations is a requirement by the current regulatory framework so we must abide by it. Frederick University is positive to the introduction of more flexible assessment methodologies, either by incorporating electronic proctoring systems or by enhancing the formative assessment component in continuous assessment. We are happy to note that, given the experience of remote examinations during the COVID pandemic, the regulatory authorities are re-examining the examination framework and a fruitful dialogue to this end has commenced.

> **2.c.** From the documentation provided and the information gathered from the meeting, it was not clear if formative assessment provides feedback based on rubrics, neither whether these rubrics are shared with students. In addition, the use of peer-assessment as well as gamification strategies are encouraged to increase the student levels of motivation and engagement with the e-assessment process. Finally, more sophisticated forms of feedback based on intelligent tutoring systems and conversational pedagogical agents could be considered to support immediate and automatic feedback to students and self-evaluate their advances.

For the purpose of assessment and feedback, each instructor is required to clearly set out his/her grading policy as per the prescribed assignment. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there is no universal/standardized set of rubrics. The issue will be raised to the DL Committee responsible for the pedagogical framework of online delivery. The use of games and quasi-simulations, as well as strong interaction and peer-assessment are already strongly encouraged and such activities are introduced to courses to strengthen the educational experience. We wish to point out that the University has progressed with the development of a dedicated center for the support of the development of instructional content suited for

distance learning. The technical support provided by the center will be invaluable for upgrading the content provided to students and a clear policy has been adopted for an annual review and upgrade of each course with an increase in interactive content as well as increase in self-assessment components.

We also agree and adopt the comment on incorporating intelligent tutoring systems in the pedagogical framework. Although such tools are available, it is important to ensure that these are appropriately incorporated within the overall framework. The matter is examined by the Distance Learning Committee which decided that as a first step such tools should only be used in a complementary role. As a first step automated tools for interaction and warnings generation are implemented and more sophisticated feedback provision tools are investigated for future use.

> 2.d. The university' learning management system (Moodle) provides learning analytics tools for monitoring student performance based on collecting information from the student with lower grades, poor participation or with undelivered activities. In addition, the instructors also collect related information based on their own experience and means. The EEC believes that more sophisticated forms of learning analytics mechanisms based on AI and specifically machine learning could be used to monitor and predict student performance and dropout in order to be able to provide timely corrective measures. This is strongly recommended in case of university's expansion plans through increasing the academic portfolio and student ratio per virtual classroom.

With respect to enhancing course intelligence through more advanced, AI-based tools in order to better monitor students and predict student performance and dropout rate is something that is greatly appreciated, and it falls into the University level strategy of enhancing its DL capabilities. This matter in fact has been discussed in the Distance Learning Committee and the recommendation is adopted. Specifically, the University will (a) deploy automated systems for early warning identification and (b) conduct research from the wealth of information collected through the learning platform for pattern identification in order to fine tune and strengthen the link between automated actions and results.

> 2.e. While the EEC emphasizes the benefits of any form of collaboration among students, the online synchronous collaboration among students was perceived as problematic if the program is open internationally and attended by students across separated time zones. It was not clear how the university would support this type of collaboration from the coordination perspective.

The issue, appears manageable based on our current student body, as the time lag among the existing time zones is limited (max 2 hours). Nevertheless, expanding to a broader international audience with greater time-lags may force the delivery towards a more asynchronous model where real-time interaction will be, inevitably lower. In such case, a major redesign of the modules may be required. To avoid this, the program would proceed with the development of subgroups/cohorts so as to ensure that the model for synchronous communication can be maintained. It is noted that a new cohort is created for every group of 30 students. On the other hand, or limited experience with international students has shown that the students have a lot to gain from interaction with other students from other parts of this world so we would be against forming strict cohorts divided by time regions, so interaction, especially in form of group work would be required.

In summary, the concerns raised by the EEC are shared with us and we are appropriately prepare to address them, should such issues arise.

3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

Areas of improvement and recommendations

> 3.a. We recommend that teaching staff develops a more structured approach to integrate their research into teaching, as well as the research activities of students. This is not aimed at developing a separate research effort, but a departmental research strategy that supports the teaching (and the industry) in the short- and long-term.

The Department has, as a first step, communicated and encouraged the joint effort of Faculty in developing a more structured approach, such that research is integrated into their teaching. To facilitate this a research strategy encompassing the steps outlined in Sections 1 and 2 as well as the design of a long-term strategy that will formalize such efforts, are a high priority in the Department's strategic plan.

4. **Student admission, progression, recognition and certification**

All areas marked as compliant

Areas of improvement and recommendations

> 4.a.   The review of information and material provided in relation to the MSc program, as well as the interviews conducted during the visit, did not result in suggestions for improvement in this area.

We would like to thank the committee for their positive remarks.

5. **Learning resources and student support**

All areas marked as compliant

Areas of improvement and recommendations

> 5.a. While the university facilities and student support services are at an excellent level, it may be worthwhile to consider how research carried out by faculty members in the Department may be better integrated into the programme.

Please refer to answer 3a.

> 5.b. The EEC suggest that some considerations should be taken into account to the video lectures and video materials to be more usable and accessible for students: make them short, include the teacher in all the videos to provide non-verbal communication, and add subtitles for accessibility.
>
> Even though the online courses include a good variety of learning materials (e-books, videos, papers, etc.) which is good for distance learning, they were not shown during the meeting in detail.

We do acknowledge that the audiovisual material could and should improve. Almost identical comments have been made during the internal audit of the program by the Distance Learning Committee and we accept. The process of breaking down video content into smaller digital assets with clear focus is adopted. Furthermore, the Distance Learning Committee has adopted the guidelines for Universal Design Learning to maximize accessibility. To this end, all rich media content produced is processed by the center for the support of the development of instructional content to ensure conformity

6. **Conclusions and final remarks**

The nature of the programme is compatible with distance learning delivery and the methodology provided is appropriate for the particular programme of study.

The External Evaluation Committee would like to re-iterate a number of positive points that came out of this review. In particular, the following aspects are points of strength on which the Course management team should build upon further in order to guarantee future growth and success:

- An experienced academic team with strong links with the local shipping and business communities
- Courses that are well organised and are attuned to the needs and requirements of the local market thus providing students with solid practical skills.
- Strong links with the local shipping and finance clusters that enhances the employment prospects of graduates.
- Good administrative support (student affairs, IT, Library personnel).

At the same time, the learning outcomes in the module specifications need to be streamlined and modified to reflect the learnings objectives of an MSc degree. It is recommended to revise the entire structure of intended learning outcomes for the program as a whole and all the underlying courses, stick to a hierarchical taxonomy, and reduce the number of ILOs overall.

In addition, the absence of a research culture and lack of a clearly defined research agenda is something that the courses need to address in order to maintain their competitiveness.

Finally, the fact a number of experienced visiting faculty are going to retire over the next few years will also affect the courses. The management team must draw alternative plans by drawing upon the expertise of industry contacts and alumni.

Firstly, we would like to sincerely thank the External Evaluation Committee for their hard work, the constructive discussions held during the virtual visit, and the valuable recommendations made for improving our proposed program.

In relation to the recommendations made by the EEC, we believe we have taken the necessary actions and have fully adopted them, as evident from our responses in sections 1 to 5 of this response.

We are looking forward to the positive decision by the Cyprus QAA and are eager to commence running the program from the coming academic year.

B. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Prof. George Demosthenous	Rector	