



07.14.318.039

Doc. 300.1.2

## Higher Education Institution's Response

Date: 01/07/2021

- **Higher Education Institution:**  
Frederick University
- **Town:** Nicosia
- **School:** Education and Social Sciences
- **Department:** Education
- **Programme(s) of study under evaluation**  
Name (Duration, ECTS, Cycle)

### Programme

#### **In Greek:**

Ειδική Εκπαίδευση (3 / 4 ακαδημαϊκά Εξάμηνα, 90/110 ECTS, Μάστερ (MSc))

#### **In English:**

Special Education (3 / 4 academic semesters, 90/110 ECTS, Master (MSc))

**Language(s) of instruction:** Greek

**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, without changing the format of the report:*
  - *the findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
  - *the deficiencies noted under the quality indicators (criteria)*
  - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The HEI's response must follow below the EEC's comments, which must be copied from the external evaluation report (Doc. 300.3.1).*
- *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, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

- 1.1 The programme seems to cover many different topics, but lacks focus despite the fact that the programme mentions that the students are expected to acquire “excellent knowledge” on several topics. There are courses that provide broad, introductory information (e.g., Current Trends) and courses that are too specialized and, maybe, detached from the rest of the programme (e.g., Antiracist Education).
- 1.2 Students with Bachelor degrees in Primary or Secondary Education should be familiar with many of the topics covered in the programme, while courses such as Research Methodology appear content-heavy and highly challenging for someone that has no experience with quantitative methods and inferential statistics.
- 1.3 In the end, the Committee believes that the programme should be better aligned to the advertised learning goals. With such a broad audience, it is expected that not all student needs will be matched perfectly with the offered programme. Therefore a suggestion would be to increase even further the number of elective courses, strengthen the role of study advisors, and provide different tracks for people with different backgrounds.
- 1.4 Shorter courses of ECTS could also be used to provide added value to previously acquired knowledge (e.g., introductory/advanced statistics) and increase the flexibility and adaptability of the programme.
- 1.5 Understandably, a study programme should address the needs of an identified audience. At the same time, though, it has to be aligned with the learning goals routinely linked to an MEd in Special Education. The refugee crisis may provide justification for including a course on Antiracist Education, but it is not necessarily adequate justification to make the course mandatory. It may be beneficial for the University and the audience it attracts to make the target audience explicit (e.g., in-service teachers) and offer relevant, but not core courses, as electives for students that want a broader spectrum.
- 1.6 Another recommendation to increase the focus and flexibility of the programme is

to include electives from different programmes across the university. This would allow for a focused set of core courses while offering different tracks to students with different backgrounds.

- 1.7 Regarding the information provided on the programme on the University's webpage, the Committee saw discrepancies between the public information and the application to CYQAA. Specifically, there are only two available spots for elective courses; one in the second and one in the third semester. Similarly, Development Psychology appears as a mandatory course, while there is no description of any of the courses apart from their title.
- 1.8 A short description of each course should be available before admission to the programme.
- 1.9 For international students it would be good if also courses in English language would be available.

#### Department's Response:

- 1.1 All recommendations of the EEC regarding the programme structure and the content of the courses have been adopted, resulting in a renewed programme structure that is followed by a thorough revision of specific course contents (see Annex 1).
- 1.2 The recommendation of the EEC regarding the content of the course 'Research Methodology' has been adopted, thus resulting in reducing the covered material, for instance by eliminating topics related to inferential statistics (see Annex 1 & 2).
- 1.3 The EEC's recommendation regarding an increase in the number of the elective courses has been adopted. Thus, the list of elective courses was extended and includes the following courses:
  - SPE506: Sensory Disabilities
  - SPE507: Learning Difficulties and Behavioural Problems
  - SPE508: Current trends in special and inclusive education
  - SPE509: Intercultural practices and inclusive education (see **Annex 1**, table 3).
- 1.4 As per the calculations for the expected student load in order to obtain the learning outcomes required for the courses, 10 ECTS courses are deemed appropriate.

Furthermore, postgraduate programmes of study are in line with the regulations followed by Cypriot universities regarding the programme structure and mirror the philosophy of the Department.

- 1.5 The EEC's recommendation regarding the course SPE504, so far entitled, *'Antiracist Education'* has been fully adopted. The course content has been fundamentally reviewed and, now onwards, is offered merely as an elective course under the title *'Intercultural practices and Inclusive Education'* (course code SPE509).
- 1.6 We thank the EEC for the useful recommendation that we wish to take into consideration as a long-term goal, since our current priority is to offer students a well focussed programme on the basis of the revised, as well as the new introduced courses that have been designed based on the EEC's suggestions (see points 1.1 & 1.3).
- 1.7 The information presented on the University's website corresponds to the current programme of study. After accreditation of the reviewed programme by the Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, the website – including short descriptions of all courses – will be updated accordingly.
- 1.8 A short description of each course is available on the programme's webpage under the following URL: [\(Link\)](#). After accreditation of the reviewed programme by the Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, the website – including updated information and short descriptions of all courses – will be updated accordingly.
- 1.9 In line with the EEC's above suggestion and the University's strategic planning for expansion to an English speaking audience, which also reflects one of the main goals of the Republic of Cyprus, namely to develop into an international educational hub, the University authorities are exploring the potential to offer specific master programmes of study in English. The conventional programme in Special Education is among them.

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

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

- 2.1 As stated in the Application ‘Almost all courses include a written final exam in their assessment methods.’ To create a more autonomous learning process and also to address students different learning styles it would be recommended to increase the flexibility and to vary with the final exam (e.g., oral exam, seminar work).
- 2.2 Moreover, assessments could also be carried out by more than just one examiner.
- 2.3 As only a very limited part of the grade is linked with interactive activities (around 5%) it is also recommended to overthink the criteria for marking – to ensure that students are in interaction among each other and with the teaching staff. In addition, multi-tiered systems of support should be established for students and evidence-based practice should be embedded within teaching methods in higher education.
- 2.4 According to the collaboration with schools (which are right now mainly focusing on practice), it is recommended that also research collaborations are strengthened. For example, within the Research Methods course, collaborations could be installed and research could directly address school’s needs (e.g., evaluation of a new learning programme, running an intervention study etc.). This would link theory, research, and practice further and make it obvious for students that research is also needed for school development process.
- 2.5 The access for students with disabilities should be further developed. Especially in the field of special needs, higher education students who themselves have a disability must have the possibility to participate without barriers.
- 2.6 Since the practicum is not mandatory, students, who do not actually teach in schools (or who have already collected teaching experiences), may find it difficult to link theory and practice. Especially for those students the practicum should be highly recommended or even mandatory since the advertised programme goals include practical experience.

Similarly, if students are not writing a thesis their practical experience with research is limited. For those students an elective course on research might be helpful. Otherwise, it would also be possible to divide the master’s program into

different tracks: one which addresses “Special Education” for in-service teachers and which is strongly focused on inclusive schooling and special schooling and one which is more research-oriented and attracts students, who plan to pursue a research career.

- 2.7 Based on the students’ feedback, more knowledge is needed about “how to deal with students with behavioral problems”. This is a very important topic in the field of special needs as many teachers are afraid of deviant behavior and class disturbances. Therefore, an elective course would be appropriate.
- 2.8 Opportunities for students to get involved as teaching assistants, research assistants or volunteers need to be expanded.

#### **Department’s Response:**

- 2.1 We fully agree with EEC’s recommendation. In all programme courses a variety of different learning materials is available, and teacher training sessions have been planned to support them in creating a variety of examination types, including oral examinations (in the presence of two examiners) and project-based evaluation.
- 2.2 Following the EEC’s recommendation, we introduce within our Quality Assurance system the randomly selected double assessment of a subset of student work, in order to further ensure and assess conformity to standards.
- 2.3 In accordance with the EEC’s recommendation, the scoring weight of all course components has been re-evaluated. As a result, the percentage of the grade that corresponds to the completion of interactive activities (in class activities) has increased significantly, counting for 15% of the total grade.
- 2.4 We agree with the EEC’s recommendation. Thus, it has been decided to intensify our collaborations with schools in order to support students in organizing and implementing small-scale research activities in field. This will be implemented in the context of the Research Methods course, as well as that of the dissertation thesis, starting from the academic year 2021-2022.
- 2.5 We fully agree with the EEC’s above recommendation. Ensuring accessibility to the programme for all students is one of the strategic goals of the University. In line with the EEC’s remarks, the Counselling Centre, through which Disability Services are

- offered, provides all students with SEN an individualised support plan with accommodations that address each student's specific needs. We have also acquired (and will be offering from the new academic year) assistive technology equipment, such as personal listening devices, and assistive technology software, such as text-to-speech software, screen reader).
- 2.6 98% of the of the students is already doing the practicum. The teaching staff is committed to further encourage the students to partake practicum in order to reach 100% participation as per the new academic year.
- 2.7 The EEC's above recommendation has been adopted. In fact, a new elective course, entitled '*Learning Difficulties and Behavioural Problems*', (course code SPE507) has been designed and will be offered in the upcoming spring term 2022 (see **Annex 01** and **Annex 02**).
- 2.8 In accordance with the EEC's recommendation there are various job opportunities for existing students as well as graduates of the program of Special Education and other programs of the University. Regarding opportunities for student involvement in volunteer work, members of the School of Education and Social Sciences participate in NGOs and in other organizations and offer volunteer services to NGOs and Social Institutions along with our students who help various voluntary organizations (for example to conduct research to evaluate their existing programs and services, to evaluate their staff, to examine social needs of the community in order to develop programs and services -Municipality of Polemidia, Municipality of Ypsona, Municipality of Nicosia, Municipality of Limassol, etc).

### 3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

#### Areas of improvement and recommendations

#### 3.1 Increase publication in highly ranking journals.

The list of publications shows there is room for improvement concerning the number of publications and number of staff that has publication in highly ranged journals. Most of the publications date back to 2018 or earlier.

#### 3.2 Look into a possible reduction in teaching load allowing for the staff more time to research and thus higher synergy between teaching and own research.

#### 3.3 Recruiting staff with more in depth knowledge of specific areas within SEN

#### Department's Response:

3.1 Research activities form one of the core pillars of operation as defined in Frederick University's Charter. In line with the EEC's remark, as well as with the standards set by the Research & Innovation Strategy of the Department of Educational Sciences, it is decided that one of the main foci for employability at Frederick University as a Collaborating Teaching Staff (as well as for the renewal of the employment contract) is active involvement in research, and an active publication track (see relevant vacancy announcements ([Link](#))).

3.2 As per Frederick University's Regulations the maximum teaching load of the academic staff is 12 hours per week. The teaching load also includes the teaching hours in the distance learning programs (a group of 30 people corresponds to 3 hours per week). As per the 96th Senate Decision reduction of teaching hours is made for University officials, for research and teaching staff members with intense research activity or for research and teaching staff members to whom the University assigns additional responsibilities and work e.g. members of Special Committees or other working groups. The exact number of reduction of teaching hours is approved by the Rector's Council, after a suggestion of the President of the Department and the consent of the Dean of the School.

The average teaching hours of the academic staff is around 10hours / week, and the breakdown between teaching – research – administration is around 39% Teaching – 15% administrative – 46% research.

3.3 Following the EEC's recommendation, it was decided to proceed with new recruitments and welcome new teaching personnel with a strong focus on specific areas within SEN. In fact, in line with the committee's suggestions, the programme coordinators have proceeded in the interview and evaluation process of new collaborating teaching staff, which has resulted in the recruitment (for the upcoming academic semester, Fall 2021) of new instructors. Thus, as of the upcoming academic semester (fall 2021) the following recruitments are activated:

- Name: Prof. Stavroula Polychronopoulou. Expertise: learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, children and adolescents with SEN.
- Name: Dr. Eleni Samsari. Expertise: Physical disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Special Educational Needs.
- Name: Dr. Nayia Stylianidou. Expertise: Inclusive Education, disability studies, Universal Design for Learning, Blended Learning
- Name: Dr. Areti Stylianou. Expertise: Inclusive Education, educational inequalities, teacher (dis)/empowerment.
- Name: Dr. Chrysoula Maggafa. Expertise: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Educational Technologies for Children with Disabilities (see **Annex 03** for CVs and **Annex 01**, table 4).

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

##### Areas of improvement and recommendations

- 4.1 There are several concerns specifically concerning the requirement of Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student admission are in place. First there is a lack of clarity in the requirements. For example, it is required that applicants have, “A good undergraduate degree from a recognized university.” During the interview, a few examples were provided (e.g., primary education, psychology). However, as written, the requirement is too vague to be useful and to allow for follow-up to see if the requirement is being appropriately followed. There is a need for clarity in the written admission requirement.
- 4.2 A second concern is the alternative requirement to an undergraduate degree: “or the equivalent international qualification or an acceptable professional qualification is considered the main academic requirement.” There was clarification during the interview with administrators and an explanation that this could apply to professionals that earned their degree before the field of teacher education was integrated into the university system. However, there were questions as to if this is still relevant, given how long ago the change was made. Whether or not the issue remains applicable, there is a need for clarity in the written admission requirement.
- 4.3 A third concern is the requirement and assertion that, “very good knowledge of Greek and English is extremely important.” While, for example, the TOEFL is mentioned, there is no minimum requirement that would allow for the objective evaluation of future students. In our discussions with current students in the program, it was also evident that some of them did not have even the most basic level of spoken English. The specific language requirements need additional specificity.
- 4.4 A fourth concern is the mention that students entering the program must have proficiency in “digital literacy.” The term is undefined and there are no criteria for proficiency; both issues need to be addressed in the written information provided to students and used as the basis for acceptance in the program.
- 4.5 A fifth concern is the assertion that an interview will be part of the admissions process for just some prospective students: “Where the Evaluation Program

Committee deems necessary, the candidates may be asked for an interview meeting.” There is no information provided that explains the circumstances for which a student would be required to participate in an interview, the focus of the interview, or criteria for a successful interview. These aspects need serious consideration and written explanation for students. Because so many of the aspects of the admission criteria are undefined and no criterion level is set, it is not possible to ensure that, “Access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.” Additionally, no information was provided in the application that specifically addressed consistency and transparency.

#### **Department’s Response:**

- 4.1 As the EEC noted the term “A good undergraduate degree from a recognized university” is too vague and we would like to apologize for the mistake in the proper translation of the requirements. The correct notation is “Candidates for a master degree must submit a recognized bachelor degree or qualification deemed to be equivalent to degree level as well as the official transcripts (grade reports) of their first-degree studies”. Furthermore, this is in line with the law for Private Universities ([Link](#)) (article 37, paragraph 4), where it states that postgraduate applicants should be holders of an undergraduate degree from an accredited University.
- 4.2 We would like to clarify that as noted in point 4.1, as per the law for Private Universities, professional qualifications are not recognized as alternative qualifications for entrance in postgraduate studies. The only alternative equivalent qualifications accepted are any titles of study evaluated by the Cyprus Council of Recognition of higher Education Qualifications ([KY.S.A.T.S](#)) and awarded equivalence and correspondence.
- 4.3 The University applies the English Language requirements are as per the CYQAA announcements ([Link](#)) and the relevant decisions of the Ministry of Education, Culture Sport and Youth
- 4.4 The EEC is right that there are no criteria for proficiency in digital skills required and this criterion is vague and difficult to assess during the admissions process. To this end, we have removed it from the admissions criteria. Instead, we have amended the

list of prerequisites that the student should have available to him in order to participate and be an active member of the program including:

- Access to reliable broadband internet
- Computer with camera and microphone capacity
- Ability to send and receive emails and files
- Ability to operate within a web digital environment such as the learning platform
- Ability to manage word-processing, presentation and other basic office application functions.

4.5 As part of the program's announcement for the new MA positions the least requirements of the candidates are posed. Indicative announcement of our program for the academic year 2021-2022 is published at the University webpage ([Link](#)). Candidates who have not a well-known BA in related studies obtained at Greece or Cyprus or those who do not present a clear proposal for a study on Special Education as part of their application, they are asked to take part at an individual admission interview conducted by the program's coordinators. During the interview as coordinators we aim to ensure: a) the existence of a related BA diploma, b) the adequate knowledge of the English language, c) the presentation of a relevant research proposal with main suggestions for conducting a study in Special Education.

## 5. Learning resources and student support

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

- 5.1 The lack of free online textbooks limits course materials to just some chapters. Therefore, it is recommended to provide adequate access to online textbooks.
- 5.2 There is no information on interlibrary loans and agreements that would allow students and academic staff to access publications that are not currently available.

### Department's Response:

- 5.1 The suggested literature of each course is based on a variety of literature resources, including parts of textbooks, international journal articles, conference proceedings, online data bases etc. In addition, students have access to a large number of international databases, such as ScienceDirect, ERIC, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, as well as databases for Greek scientific literature, e.g. Κάλλιπος. The librarians of both campuses in Nicosia and Limassol are available and trained to support all students of the distance learning master programmes. As discussed with the EEC, this is a limitation set by the language of instruction where online textbooks in Greek are virtually non-available. This is a problem faced by all distance-learning delivery universities in Cyprus and Greece and we are coordinating with other universities in order to identify improved solutions that respect intellectual property laws.

- 5.2 Frederick University is part of the Cyprus Academic Libraries Consortium (CALC), which is responsible chiefly for ensuring consortium access to electronic library material. All the public universities and the majority of private universities are members of CALC. CALC members have the facility of interlibrary loans between them thus significantly increasing the access to publications to our students.

Importantly, Frederick University is completing an agreement with the Hellenic Open University (HOU) for the delivery of a joint postgraduate degree (LLM in European Law). Under this collaboration, Frederick University and Hellenic Open University will have the capacity for interlibrary loan between the two libraries for hard-copy and electronic material. As HOU maintains the richest source of digital content in Greece, this provides a huge increase of access to publications to our students.

## B. Conclusions and final remarks

- The program evaluated has never been operational
  - A key point with this evaluation is that the program evaluated never has been operational and this is according to the program administrators due to lack of student interest. The panel recommends the staff to revise the way in which public information about the program is available to prospective students.
- The broadness of the programme
  - The program strategy aim to give the students an excellent knowledge of the different areas in special needs education (e.g: hearing loss, Down syndrome, ADHD, etc.) The panel found the program to be too broad to be able to meet all the advertised learning goals/strategy. The panel advises to the staff to explore the possibility for increase type of courses that aim to give a more in depth knowledge.
  - The panel advises an improvement and clarification of the programme admission criteria
  - To secure a high quality education and meet the programmes aims stated in the programme strategy, there is an significant need to increase and strengthen the research capacity and the amount of academics publishing in top-tier publications

The panel thank the departmental team for their openness in discussions and very helpful attitude.

We wish to underline that all areas of improvement, as depicted in the panel's comments, have been thoroughly studied and all EEC's recommendations have either been adopted or are currently implemented, as explained by the Department's comments (as shown in **Annexes 01, 02 and 03**).

Finally, we wish to thank the External Evaluation Committee for the constructive dialogue and their very interesting and thoughtful remarks. These provided a very fruitful ground for the program coordinators to reflect - together with the team of DL instructors and all colleagues involved in the Special Education distance learning Master Program - on the fundamentals of the programme and suggest significant changes, in order to improve and enhance the overall quality and the learning experience offered to our students.



### C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
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Prof. George Demosthenous Rector

Date: 01/06/2021

