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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), Εξ αποστάσεως)

In English:

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

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 Because of the current success of the programme, each course may have many teachers. Even though there is only one course coordinator and there are efforts to synchronise the teachers, it is also expected that the learning experience offered may differ between groups of two teachers. Therefore, the University is further advised to monitor and review homogeneity in instructional design, delivery, engagement, etc. among the student groups within a course.
- 1.8 DLU has a central role in the success of any online programme. The tools, services, and training presented during the evaluation are in line with what should be expected from such a unit. Because of DLU's expertise in online pedagogy, the Committee suggests strengthening its role in reviewing the programme and ensuring its quality.
- 1.9 Making the attendance of the 0 ECTS course on online Education mandatory is a clear strength, but this could be further enhanced by having the teachers going through periodic training activities. Online Education requires innovative pedagogies and relies heavily on emerging technologies. Having regular round tables to discuss best practices, deal with online disengagement, understand student contribution in online groupwork could help teachers dealing with the needs of distance learning programmes.
- 1.10 The internal programme review board could be extended to include representatives of the teachers (apart from the coordinators who also teach) and of DLU.
- 1.11 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.
- 1.12 A short description of each course should be available before admission to the

programme.

- 1.13 For international students it would be good if also courses in English language would be available. Having so many students there might be the possibility of offering the complete programme also in English language?

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**). Specifically, following the EEC's recommendations and, in order to enhance the expected learning outcomes, to support students in deepening their knowledge regarding issues of Special and Inclusive Education in the course of the whole programme of study, and thus, improve the programme structure the following actions were discussed and approved by the Council of the Department:

- DLSPE 501 – '*Special and Inclusive Education: Current research and theory*': The content of the mandatory course DLSPE501 (so far entitled '*Special and Inclusive Education: Current research and theory*') is fundamentally revised. The course – now entitled '*Special and Inclusive Education*' – has a clearer focus, covering in more depth dimensions, such as theoretical interpretive models of disability, theoretical perspectives on the education of students with disabilities etc. (see **Annex 2**).
- DLSPE 504 – '*Antiracist Education*': We found EEC's critical remarks to be fair and very helpful towards rethinking the purpose of the course. As a result, the course has been fundamentally revised, with the goal of sharpening its focus and strengthening the connection with the rest of the programme. The course – now entitled '*Intercultural Practices and Inclusive Education*' and offered under the code DLSPE 509 – has been fundamentally reviewed and explores, among others, concepts of diversity and models of diversity management in education, the interconnection between intercultural and inclusive education and the impact of specific educational practices for supporting a specific student population with migration biography and SEN. Finally, it must be noted that the course is now offered merely as an elective (see **Annex 2**).

- New elective courses: In order to align with the EEC's recommendation for providing students with more choices in studying in-depth various specific topics related to the field of Special and Inclusive Education, it was discussed and approved by the Council of the Department to increase the number of elective courses. Additionally, the number of elective courses each student can enrol in the course of their studies has increased from 30 ECTS to 40 ECTS. Thus, the list of elective courses was extended and now includes the following courses:
 - DLSPE506: '*Sensory Disabilities*'
 - DLSPE507: '*Learning Difficulties and Behavioural Problems*'
 - DLSPE508: '*Current trends in Special and Inclusive education*'
 - DLSPE509: '*Intercultural practices and Inclusive Education*' (see **Annex 1** and **Annex 2**).
- 1.2 Acknowledging the EEC's comments regarding the content of the course '*Research Methodology*' (as being content-heavy and highly challenging for someone that has no experience with quantitative methods and inferential statistics), the recommendation of the EEC has been adopted and the course content has been revised, thus resulting in reducing the covered material, for instance by eliminating topics related to inferential statistics (see **Annex 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:
 - DLSPE506: Sensory Disabilities
 - DLSPE507: Learning Difficulties and Behavioural Problems
 - DLSPE508: Current trends in special and inclusive education
 - DLSPE509: 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 DLSPE504, 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 DLSPE 509).
- 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 University takes very seriously the homogeneity of the courses in regards to instructional design, delivery, engagement, etc. among the student groups within a course. In line with the EEC's advice, the university provides continuous trainings to all teaching personnel, and regular meetings between collaborating teaching staff, faculty members and the course coordinator serve in monitoring, discussing and revising instructional design and aspects related to the course delivery. To ensure homogeneity and consistency of the aforementioned parameters the university employs the following: The courses are designed and delivered based on the Distance Learning pedagogical framework developed by the Distance Learning Committee (DLC). The courses are expected to include a number of elements based on the Pedagogical Framework. The DLC in collaboration with the ODLC (Open and Distance Learning Center) and the Internal Quality Committee of the University developed and implement a Quality Assurance control process. One of the goals of the quality assurance – control process is to ensure that the Pedagogical Framework is successfully implemented.

More specifically, the Distance Learning Committee, has developed a procedure for internal Quality Control for the distance learning programs as part of the university's implementation of strategic planning in providing quality distance learning education and continuous updating of processes of the distance learning program of studies. The developed procedure is in line with international practices, policies and research results as well as with the guidelines and instructions of the regulatory authority, C.Y.Q.A.A. The quality assurance procedure described is part of the Quality Assurance Policy and System of the University, which is developed and

implemented by the Internal Quality Committee. The Quality Assurance Control aims to examine, evaluate and identify the levels of compliance or of no relevance to the teaching of the distance learning programs as defined by the Pedagogical framework regulating the distance learning at Frederick University, the duties form of the distance learning programs instructors, as well as the procedures that must be kept in accordance within the operation of the University. The evaluation also aims at carrying out formative measures and taking timely actions in matters of non-compliance, as well as to identify and then to disseminate good practices and examples. Finally, it seeks to take steps towards recognizing and rewarding good practices and examples. Based on the above, this procedure intends in strengthening the mechanisms of continuous improvement of the quality of teaching, as well as in developing a quality teaching culture of the distance learning programs.

Additionally, the course coordinators develop closed relationships with the DL instructors responsible to teach the same course. Coordination meetings in order to guide and support the DL Instructors are being organized to help and support

Finally, the DLC in collaboration with the Information System Services & Computing Services Department of the University are working in developing templates to be employed across all courses offered via the distance learning mode. This process will further ensure consistency and homogeneity in regards to course design and delivery.

Based on EEC's recommendations, these efforts have been further intensified. It is noted that the matter of homogeneity is further enforced through the Quality Assurance processes where a common final examination amongst cohorts is required and furthermore the continuous assessment and student feedback is analysed to identify and address deviations between cohorts.

- 1.8 The DLU, being the administrative arm of the Distance Learning Committee (DLC) should have a significant role in the program review and development. We therefore agree with the suggestion of the Committee to strengthen the role of the Distance Learning Committee (DLC) in reviewing the programme and ensuring its quality. The University has also implemented various actions towards the aforementioned goal. The DLC has already established closed collaborations and relationships with the programme's coordinators and the DL instructors. Regular meetings throughout the

year are organized between the DLC and the DL programme's coordinators. This relationship is maintained and further strengthened via the trainings and information sessions organized by the DLC to the DL instructors, as well as via constant communication, interaction and exchange of experiences.

- 1.9 We agree with the suggestion of the Committee and the DLC is currently working towards that goal. Even though there is an established process of DL instructors' continuous professional training and support, the DLC in collaboration with the ODCL is developing an online self-paced training module for the DL Instructors. The Training Module is being pilot tested by the members of the DLC as well as other DL instructors. It will be up and running by Fall 2021. The DL Instructors are expected to attend professional development trainings as well as information and discussion sessions. Follow up trainings within the semester based on the needs and demands of new and experienced academic staff are also scheduled. Finally, on the spot trainings for new tools/ new developments (i.e. ZOOM use Vs Adobe Connect) are organized. The ODCL continuously provides pedagogical and technical support and guidance to the DL coordinators and instructors on personal and/ or group/ programme level (i.e. group meetings per DL programme of study and personal meetings with DL instructors).
- 1.10 Dr Olga Lyra (Programme coordinator) is already a member of the internal programme review committee as well as a member of the Distance Learning Committee (DLC). Furthermore, adopting the recommendation of the EEC., the head of the DLC (Dr Nikleia Eteokleous), who is also a member of the Department's teaching staff, as well as an additional member from the programme teaching staff (Dr Natali Loizidou), is added in the programme review committee.
- 1.11 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.
- 1.12 A short description of each course is available on the programme's webpage under the following URL: <https://dl.frederick.ac.cy/en/μεταπτυχιακό-στην-ειδική-εκπαίδευση-δομή-και-περιεχόμενα>. 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.

- 1.13 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 distance learning programme on 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. Right now, it seems that there are very limited possibilities and almost no students are participating. While the University already offers guidance to teachers and students on the requirements and particularities of distance learning through the DLU, these guidelines are not always applied in courses. Specifically, it was mentioned that in several cases, the students are unwilling to switch on their cameras or engage into classroom discussion. This is an issue that has been long identified in online Education and research suggests that such behaviour impedes learning and detaches the student from the class. This behavior has also a significant effect on the teacher’s performance and the overall quality of the learning experience. Real-time, meaningful participation must be integrated in the instructional design. The fact that the perceived average student in the programme is 40 years old could suggest that many of the students are not familiar or comfortable interacting with the teacher and their peers online. However, since the programme is offered in a Master programme and not in a MOOC or SPOC, high interactivity, collaboration, group awareness, social inclusion, etc. must not only be encouraged but ensured.
- 2.9 A related issue is the overall production value of the online learning experience. A nicely arranged set up with a clear background, high definition video, right camera angle, and good sound quality can positively affect the learning experience. The University should support the teachers in improving their online presence with seminars and, where needed, appropriate equipment as the build-in camera/microphone of a middle-range laptop are not appropriate for a 2-hour lecture.

2.10 Perhaps the University could organize teaching awards acknowledging effective and entrepreneurial practices in e-learning, thus further encouraging teachers to improve the overall experience the students have in the programme.

Department's Response:

2.1 We appreciate and fully agree with the EEC's recommendation. Supporting our students' individual learning styles has been one of the most essential priorities when designing each course's learning material. In all programme courses one can find a considerable amount of different types of learning material, making the course content accessible to all our students. Concretely, one comes across different types of presentations (interactive presentations, narrative presentations etc.), videos, narrations, workbooks, quizzes, wikis, fora, written individual and group assignments etc. In addition, 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. Regarding the final examination, there is a variety of exam papers that are created, in accordance to the goals of each course. Exam papers may contain close-ended questions as well as open-ended reflective questions. Finally, the dissertation is always submitted to and evaluated by a committee of three members of the teaching staff within the context of an oral final exam.

2.2 Within the Cyprus higher educational system, it is not customary for continuous and final assessments to be carried out by examiner, internal or external, other than the academic responsible for the delivery of the course. An exception to this rule is the assessment by committees of academics of theses and dissertation projects, a practice we also adopt at Frederick University.

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, and in order to enhance students' motivation regarding their engagement with interactive activities, 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 has increased significantly, counting for 15% of the total grade. Thus, the scoring weight of all course components has been reviewed and the following changes have been implemented:

- Scoring weight of written assignments: 35% (this percentage is divided, given the number of written assignments/quizzes/presentations etc. and their respective weight)
- Scoring weight of interactive activities: 15%
- Scoring weight of final course examination: 50%

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. Further, it was decided to enhance the connection of theory and practice by requesting by all faculty members and collaborating teaching staff to make sure that they incorporate activities that are targeting this connection in their courses. This should be documented in the Internal Quality Course Evaluation report that is completed for each course every year and submitted to the coordinator(s) of the programme. If corrective actions need to take place, the coordinators will oversee these.

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. Further, the Counselling Centre advises all involved instructors with the specific support that must be provided to a student with disability, attending the course. Further, to enhance participation and the learning experience for students with disabilities to the distance learning master programme in Special Education, it was discussed and decided that a bigger part of the learning material will be made accessible to students with disabilities, e.g., by making specific reasonable adaptations for students with sensory disabilities (sight,

hearing), and by providing material in simplified language, particularly for students with learning disabilities.

We fully understand the obligation we have as a University in safeguarding the right of access to education for all individuals and we acknowledge that there needs to be an ongoing effort in evolving our services and resources in order to achieve this. We are currently working towards assessing our current support mechanisms in order to improve and/ or expand them. To that end we have developed the Student Disability Services Satisfaction Survey for students with special needs who receive disability services as well as the Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey in regards to the academic and psychosocial needs of our students as they have evolved during the pandemic with the goal of administering it using the data to improve the design and delivery of our services before the beginning of the next academic year. Being one of the first Universities to have established a Counselling Centre with a full-time social worker and psychologist employed within the Centre, shows our strong orientation and commitment to creating an environment that supports all of our students throughout their studies. The Counselling Centre through which Disability Services are offered implement with all students with special needs an individualised support plan with accommodations that address the needs of each students.

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. We acknowledge that, along with all these efforts, there is also a need for continuous training to both faculty and administrative staff members, a need that has also been identified by the University's Staff Professional Development Unit and is among one of their priorities for staff training for the new academic year.

- 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 DLSPE507) has been designed and will be offered in the upcoming spring term 2022 (see **Annex 01** and **Annex 02**).

2.8 We fully agree with the EEC's recommendation. Firstly, it is important to mention that the University implements and supports a highly student-centered approach. The DL Pedagogical Framework model calls for continuous and constructive communication and interaction. DL Instructors' role focuses on steering, supporting, guiding, consulting, motivating and encouraging DL students. The aim is to develop a sense of community and belonging for the students. The aforementioned has been achieved through various synchronous and asynchronous activities. For example, during synchronous sessions, besides course delivery the DL instructors are designing activities that promote students' engagement, interaction, social inclusion such as: synchronous discussions via ZOOM, group activities (e.g., use of break out rooms, presentations of students' assignments/ scientific articles/ case studies, etc). Also, during synchronous online sessions and specifically the ones that there is interaction and discussion, the DL instructors kindly request, encourage and explain to students that are expected to open up their cameras. The engagement, interaction and communication are further enhanced and promoted through the asynchronous activities (as part of the dynamic online interaction pillar of the DL Pedagogical Framework). The asynchronous activities are being implemented via the use of technological tools such as blogs, wikis, discussion forums, collaborative interactive boards and documents. Some of the asynchronous interactive activities are graded.

Additionally, the Rector's Council set up an ad hoc Committee, the Technological Advancement of Teaching Practices, to submit to the Council a policy document and framework for the differentiation and technological advancement of teaching and learning. A policy report was developed for the integration and infusion of new technologies and infrastructure in teaching and learning taking into account the experience gained from online teaching, hybrid classrooms, the use of online platform, online assessment, etc. One of the issues revealed in the findings was the aforementioned comment by the Evaluation Committee. Action measures were already suggested by the ad hoc committee and are in the process of being approved by the Senate in order to be implemented beginning Fall 2020.

2.9 We fully agree with the EEC's comment. The University continuously works towards improving and enhancing the teaching and learning experience of the students. Towards that end, the University established the Open and Distance Learning Center

in 2018, which one of its goals is to pedagogically and technically supports, guides and trains DL instructors in developing appropriate educational material for their courses, as well as to design and deliver their courses according to the DL Pedagogical Framework and the DL principles, methodologies and approaches. Additionally, the University supports the DL instructors by providing the appropriate infostructure and equipment/ hardware.

- 2.10 The EEC's recommendation has been adopted. In fact, starting this academic year, the University has established the 'Teaching Excellence Awards', an initiative with the goal of acknowledging best practices and encouraging DL instructors to strive for excellence in teaching. Concretely, as per the decision of the University Council in its 100th meeting, Frederick University has established a number of awards in memory of its Founder, Michael Frederickou. The awards aim to highlight actions that promote the key values of the Founder and of the University, as expressed in the university's core mission pillars. The *Michael Frederickou Teaching Excellence Awards (as mentioned above)* are among the most prestigious awards and are awarded via nomination by colleagues or self-nomination. The Evaluation Committee comprises the School Deans, the Vice Rector of Academic Affairs and the President of Frederick University Council. During this year's graduation ceremony, awards for good practices and teaching excellence in distance learning programmes have been given ([Link](#)).

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 We appreciate the EEC's suggestion to increase publication in highly ranking journals. 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 Social activities and inclusion efforts are missing for online students. Social interaction, inclusion, and the feeling of belonging to a learning community must be nurtured by the University. Online events such as casual meetings with peers, past graduates, and teachers in a non-teaching capacity could help students create bonds.
- 5.3 The University kindly provided recorded lectures as supplementary material and it was apparent that the teachers had to rely on the quality of the build-in cameras and microphones of their computers for delivering online Education. Even though it is not connected to the quality of the learning material, the presentation layer of online education is crucial and the University is strongly advised to review the training and equipment the teachers have in setting up and delivering learning experience of high production value.
- 5.4 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 We appreciate the EEC's suggestion for strengthening social interaction, inclusion, and the feeling of belonging to a learning community and in order to help students to create bonds. We find the committee's suggestion to be very helpful and inspiring for us to strengthen our efforts in creating the feeling of belonging to a learning community for our students. This remark is in line with one of our core goals, namely to get to know one's learning community from the beginning of each course. This is the background of the guidelines given to all instructors that the first live meeting should take place on 'week zero', the so-called first week of each semester. The first meeting focuses on getting to know in person not only the instructor, but also one's fellow students, their backgrounds, experiences and even the place, where they are located. Through the years of the programme, we came to know of study groups formed in cities, such as Thessaloniki, Patra and Ioannina. Further, we take the committee's above comment as a motivation to our plans for increasing the number of social activities, e.g. through the use of group chats in the course platform and the initiation of story-telling activities, in order to share one's experiences with the support of persons with disabilities, defining personal and professional moments etc.

We fully agree with the EEC and this is a big challenge faced in distance learning degrees. It is true that most interaction and inclusion efforts focus within the academic realm. However, we have proceeded with steps to address this shortcoming including the development of social activities published among the learning community that are geared for non-academic virtual interaction; one such example is the provision of virtual sports and recreation sessions. Furthermore, a new virtual meeting space for all distance learning students is launched from the new academic year and managed by the student welfare service in collaboration with the student union. In this space synchronous talks and informal meetings are organized on various matters that may or may not be dependent on the specific program field of interest. We anticipate that such a space and series of activities will further expand the sense of belonging that is so important to a virtual community.

- 5.3 We accept that often the presentation of synchronous communication may lack due to technological infrastructure and we are designing ways to remedy this. Although the university studios provide a professional environment to conduct such recordings

and/or synchronous sessions, it is often not possible or desirable by instructors to use them. In the mandatory training sessions of all distance-learning faculty, guidelines are provided that specify recording principles and technical infrastructure and usage tips. Following the EEC recommendation, further to the training and guideline sessions, all instructors will be provided with appropriate core equipment such as microphone and camera, as well as minimum standards that must be observed for content development and communication. This will be complemented by additional focus in the training sessions in this area.

- 5.4 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 number of students attending the program, the framework present to secure student contact, and the teaching staff motivation and efforts to ensure that the student could reach their learning potential, impressed the panel.

To sum up the panels main areas for improvement the panel point at

- 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 need to improve admission criteria and transparency
- An vital need to constantly improve and develop the digital competence of the teachers
- A 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

