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Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 19.7.2023

Higher Education Institution's Response

- **Higher Education Institution: University of Nicosia**

- **Town: Nicosia**

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

  In Greek:

  Διεθνείς Σχέσεις και Σπουδές Ανατολικής Μεσογείου (1,5 Έτη / 90 ECTS, Μάστερ, Εξ αποστάσεως)

  In English:

  International Relations and Eastern Mediterranean Studies (1.5 Years / 90 ECTS, Master of Arts, E-Learning)

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

- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating

- **Concentrations (if any):**

  In Greek: Concentrations
  In English: Concentrations

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A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1 or 300.1.1/1 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area. The answers' documentation should be brief and accurate and supported by the relevant documentation. Referral to annexes should be made only when necessary.*

- *In particular, under each assessment area and by using the 2nd column of each table, the HEI must respond on the following:*

    - *the areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
    - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*

- *The institution should respond to the EEC comments, in the designated area next each comment. The comments of the EEC should be copied from the EEC report **without any interference** in the content.*

- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on separate document(s). Each document should be in *.pdf format and named as annex1, annex2, etc.*

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development
(ESG 1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9)

The MA has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section, with one exception where the Programme was deemed to be partially compliant. No major deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the process and institutional structures for assuring the quality of the program and its delivery are clear and robust. It was noted that the Programme satisfactorily reflects the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe, and makes a strong effort to reconcile the inevitable difficulties that arise when recruiting a diverse student cohort from multiple undergraduate disciplinary backgrounds and with varying age/professional/international/linguistic experiences and balancing provision of introductory subject specific and international relations material with achieving the advanced knowledge required at postgraduate level. The program structure conforms to the workload, credit, and levels of the NQFHE of the EHEA.

The EEC further observed that the learning outcomes establish the unique selling points of the programme as specialising in international relations of the Eastern Mediterranean, thus capitalising on the location of Cyprus and its historical role at the confluence of Europe and the Middle East. Information available to students on the qualification awarded, teaching, learning and assessment procedures and learning opportunities was clear and easily accessible. There is an appropriate career service available to students with information about it distributed widely.

The EEC further pointed out that the student counselling support is excellent, and that the role of the academic advisor, who connects with the student at the stage of application to the program and acts as a hub for information, guidance, support and communication between the student, the department and other services (disability, counselling etc) is important and well-constructed. Similarly, the role of the program coordinator is also important and appreciated by the students. The EEC was happy to see a strong female presence in student numbers.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improvement. We address each one herein.

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
Firstly, there is a need to revise the Intended Learning Outcomes to fully reflect the subject knowledge, skills and competences that ALL students are expected to demonstrate on successful completion of the programme and in order to graduate. Discussions with staff suggested that some of the current ILOs are	The Department of Politics and Governance agrees with the EEC recommendation and have made all necessary changes in ILOs. Revised ILOs may be found attached (Attachment 1). Specifically, as per the EEC comments, we removed ILO7 (which is covered by ILOs 2 and 8 anyway) and we amended ILO 10 according to the suggestions of the EEC.	Choose level of compliance:

legacies of previous student cohorts being principally from military or diplomatic backgrounds, while the current student cohorts are more diverse with a broader set of career objectives.		
Secondly, considerations should be given to making the methodology course (variously called Thesis 1 or Research Methodology) a core course for the program. This would consolidate the linkage between research and teaching across the program, assisting students in transitioning from passive consumers of research to being active researchers themselves, and ensuring that all students could meet ILO 8. The staff teaching in the program stress that there is a need for this; they have created an informal team to combat the decline in research skills they observe among students. Ideally, the compulsory research methodology course should be taken in students' first semester, so that they could benefit from it in their parallel and subsequent research assignments and course discussions.	We fully understand the rationale of the suggestion. It is a critical learning objective of the Programme that all students demonstrate high-quality research skills and structured legal reasoning and writing competency. We need to note that most MA students actually take the Methodology course, as it is compulsory for those who wish to fulfill a Master Thesis, but it is also offered as an elective for the rest. We note that the Research Methodology course was changed to elective following the revision of the Programme (which was approved by DIPAE in the previous round of evaluation), in order to enable the possibility of completing the requirements of the Programme in a single year in accordance with DIPAE's announcement. Due to the structure of the Programme this was only possible by merging the Dissertation with the Research Methodology for a unified 30 ECTS, and keeping the Research Methodology also as an elective for those students who did not wish to take the Thesis. This is an issue of more general concern, as it also affects other programmes and we intend to discuss it more widely. The Department and the School of Law will examine how it might be possible to implement such a change in the future, i.e. making compulsory the course, in a way that would not hinder offering the Programme in one year for those who complete the	Choose level of compliance:

	Thesis, as this is not possible at present. We have set up a committee that will examine this issue in depth and revert to the School and suggest changes. For the time being we will implement alternative choices and actions, such as that the key-points from the material of the specific course will be shared in the form of notes and guides in all Programme courses, and will be available to students.	
Thirdly, we recommend that the department review the content of courses and course materials regularly to ensure currency of topics covered and latest developments in both the region and scholarly research regarding the region. For example, a topic which seems strikingly absent from the program while being very important for the region and Cyprus in particular is the topic of irregular migration. This seems an ideal topic for an (additional) elective. Course content on the Middle East in particular should either recognize more explicitly the historical/cultural emphasis or include a greater proportion of up-to-date political study of the region based on current research scholarship and more closely aligning with the rest of the program.	We thank the EEC for their comment. Regular revision of the courses' content takes place in the context of intra-departmental discussions, through the program coordinator's overview of teaching and courses, as well as through the Internal Program Evaluation Process (IPEP). The Department agrees with the need for inclusion of topics related with latest developments and will proceed with the following: a) introduction of a new elective course titled Case Studies in Political Sociology, which will address contemporary issues like irregular migration, gender and digital politics and their impact on contemporary politics in the Eastern Mediterranean (syllabus attached as Attachment 2. Detailed study guide will be created by the lecturers, upon approval of the new course). b) Revision of MIR-551DE Politics in the Middle East to increase coverage of contemporary affairs (see a revised version of the course syllabus as Attachment 3. Upon approval, the detailed study guide will take its final form by the expert who will be recruited to teach this course, as explained below). It should be also noted that contemporary Middle East affairs are also part of the content of MIR-612 Case Studies in Conflict Analysis (from the theoretical viewpoint of	Choose level of compliance:

	conflict and security theories) and MIR-613 Case Studies in Political Sociology (from the theoretical viewpoint of political sociology).	
Finally, although this is not related to the award of partial compliance noted above, given the claims of the department regarding the career motivations of program applicants, the department might want to consider inviting stakeholders from sectors expected to employ program graduates (diplomatic community, media, INGOs, etc) to review the programme contents with a view to ensuring suitability for the employment prospects of graduates and social needs at some time in the future. As far as the acquisition of professional skills for the students, the department could also possibly consider having an internship agreement with institutions like MFA, or other regional or international organizations, journals etc. Information on entry criteria for applicants to the program should be standardised across all documentation and a distinction made between essential criteria for university entry (admissibility) and preferred candidate qualification for department selection. Clearer information on program KPIs and longitudinal student profile data should be made available to future reviews and should inform regular departmental reviews of the program.	The Department agrees with the EEC's recommendation. In the next IPEP process (scheduled to run in 2025-2026) we will appoint an external evaluating member from the non-academic sector (i.e. diplomatic corps). Regarding internship agreements, the University has recently appointed an institutional liaison who is responsible for guiding students who are interested in internships. In this framework, the Department cooperates with the liaison whenever necessary, to provide him with information regarding possible hosting institutions. The Department, as well as its affiliated institutions, maintain an extensive network of such possible partners, including the MFA (which has signed MoUs with our affiliated institutions). In relation with KPIs and longitudinal student profile data, the Department will consider this improvement at the stage of designing the next departmental strategy	Choose level of compliance:

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

The MA has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the nature of the programme is compatible with distance learning delivery, and the methodology provided is appropriate for the particular program of study. The university's distance learning quality assurance is evaluated by external and voluntary accreditations, such as EADTU and EFQUEL. It was noted that continually evaluating the quality assurance of distance learning by non-mandatory external accreditation organisations is a good practice. It was further considered that the university's distance learning model is in line with the specific profile of full and part-time students with professional and/or family duties, who need to learn effectively and in a timely fashion. The provision of personalised feedback in the submitted assignments and during the teleconference sessions, as well as the feedback based on rubrics and peer-assessment (even if the latter was not demonstrated during the site visit), are considered best practices.

The EEC further recognised the many benefits of collaboration among students promoted by collaborative activities and in-class discussions. It noted that the weekly study guides, which allow the students to determine the work to be done every week, is also considered a best practice. The EEC urged the university to keep up these strong elements of their distance learning model while reinforcing them when possible.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improvement. We address each one herein.

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
Based on the information provided and discussed during the meetings, the EEC suggests that the university consider implementing gamification strategies to increase student motivation and engagement with the e-assessment process. Additionally, the EEC recommends exploring more sophisticated forms of feedback using intelligent tutoring systems and conversational pedagogical agents to provide immediate and automatic feedback to students and enable them to self-evaluate their progress.	We fully endorse the suggestion. MA courses already include game-based activities (such as problem-solving scenarios, assessment quizzes, use of art in legal education etc.), as component either of the Webex meetings, or of the course weekly activities, the latter being fully laid out at the study guides and separately evaluated. We need to note separately that the Office of the Dean has recently presented, in the framework of a General Meeting, the approach and practice of a game-inspired teaching methodology, asking of the School's teaching staff to further incorporate it in all School Programmes course design and practice. Accordingly, as far as MA is concerned, we shall	Choose level of compliance:

	proceed promptly in reassessing the content of all MA courses, so as to assure that they integrate and make use of game-based methods and approaches (see simulations, multimedia activities, interactive scenarios), in addition to those already included.	

3. Teaching staff
(ESG 1.5)

The MA has been considered to be fully compliant in one of the criteria of this section, and partially compliant in two other criteria.

The EEC has confirmed that teaching staff qualifications are adequate to achieve the objectives and planned learning outcomes of the study programme, and to ensure quality and sustainability of the teaching and learning. The teaching staff is engaged in professional and teaching-skills training and development. The teaching staff status is appropriate to offer a quality program of study. There is sufficient scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research. The teaching staff publishes within the discipline, and teaching staff studies and publications are closely related to the program's courses.

The EEC further noted that consistent training, guidance, and support are provided to the teaching staff regarding the specificities of eLearning. In this way, innovation in the use of new technologies is also encouraged. It was further pointed out that the embedment of the program in the Department of Politics and Governance, and of the Department in the School of Law, seem to work in favor of the program. Some staff members teach in both Politics and Law; some students take courses in both; there seems to be active collaboration; and the relatively small Department gains visibility through its place in the School of Law. Moreover, the teaching staff of the program seem to form a collegial and close-knit team. The students and alumni the EEC spoke to found the program well-organized and the staff responsive and supportive. Lecturers received praise for being flexible and available in supporting the students. Program coordinator received special praise for being a good thesis supervisor, very organized, knowledgeable and supportive. The content of the program was found inspiring, also due to interesting guest speakers, sometimes from the policy world. The program was found challenging and serious.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improvement. We address each one herein.

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
The EEC suggests taking into consideration the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030 in the training programmes for the teaching staff in order to redesign the teaching materials accordingly with the aim to empower students with emerging competencies and skills (e.g., climate change, gender equality, global and ethical engagement, etc.) to take action for a more sustainable world.	We endorse the suggestion of the EEC. We note that the University as a whole, and the Department, have already taken note of the 2030 SDGs and aim to implement them in the Programme. The Department will liaise with the e-Learning Pedagogical Support Unit in order to further incorporate elements of the SDGs in the teaching materials as suggested by the EEC.	Choose level of compliance:
The information the EEC received about the research output of the teaching staff was not up to date, which it difficult to come to an up-to-date judgment	We note the comment of the EEC. It is observed that this is partly due to the long time that lapsed between the submission of the application (December	Choose level of compliance:

of their scholarly status and success	2021) and the actual evaluation time (May 2023), which is not the fault of the Department. The University regularly updates the teaching staff's published CVs.	
Of 19 teaching staff members, only three are women, of which two are part-time staff. The staff is therefore heavily gender-imbalanced. The program indicates that there are too few female applicants for positions. A recommendation might be to consider and support the "pipeline" leading from student to PhD to junior academic and in this way contribute to enlarging the female applicant pool in the discipline.	We acknowledge the gender imbalance noted by the EEC, and we agree that this is an issue we are trying to solve. The gender imbalance is due to the fact that following the last several calls for vacant positions there were essentially no applications from female experts matching with the Department's teaching needs. The Department will discuss ways to implement the EEC's recommendation, when hiring faculty in the future.	Choose level of compliance:
There is a big gap in teaching expertise on the Middle East. The staff member who was working on Political Islam has left. The position is frozen, and for the time being the program is trying to make up with part timers. This is not a sustainable situation. Right now, no member of staff has a research or publishing profile addressing the Arab and Levant part of the Eastern Mediterranean. The EEC had serious concerns about this. Therefore, sub-areas 3.1 and 3.3 receive a score of partially compliant.	The Department recognizes this lack of expertise highlighted by the EEC. There was a Middle East expert that left the University after many years last December. In order to address fully this recommendation, the Department will aim to recruit a solid Visiting Professor for the English program (DL and conventional). Our intention is to make this possible in the academic year 2023-2024. We note that this would need recruitment which will take time. All efforts will be made to utilize this opportunity for bridging the gender gap referred above. If possible, we may also apply for an additional part-timer position for the Greek program.	Choose level of compliance:

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

The MA has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section. No deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that it is positive that students are evaluated by all faculty members using the same standards, and staff take into consideration the diversity and the needs of the students. It was acknowledged that there are significant efforts by the teaching personnel to stimulate and encourage the interaction among students. It was further pointed out that students are encouraged to self-assess their own progress and that they assess the teaching by completing surveys, and that dropout rates are quite low. Students receive technical and teaching support to enable them to reconcile their studies with their work and personal life. Student feedback is actively sought at the end of courses through online anonymous surveys and on an ongoing basis throughout course delivery. The EEC notes that the response rate is quite high for this type of survey (more than 50%), which makes the information collected fairly reliable.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improvement. We address each one herein.

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
It should be clarified that additional criteria can be used for selection, like personal interviews, when there are more applicants than places for students in the program.	We endorse the recommendation of the EEC. This has been added to the existing admissions criteria (see revised Admissions Criteria as Attachment 4).	Choose level of compliance:
The EEC considers important that a minimum grade should be required for the admission of a candidate.	We note the EEC recommendation. A 2: 1 upper second class honors or equivalent is required. We will make sure that this is appears in all related links in our webpage, as well as in all related documents.	Choose level of compliance:
It is strongly recommended to encourage furthermore the students' participation in the course and also to present papers during the course, in order to promote interaction between teacher-students and students-students.	The recommendation of the EEC is well-taken. This is already regularly requested by the teaching staff, as part of our quality assurance strategy in the program. In view of AI-related challenges we will re-examine our DL teaching practices and examine ways of including more synchronous interactive obligations.	Choose level of compliance:
The EEC encourages raising the English language requirements to a higher level than the one requested.	We endorse the recommendation of the EEC. The Department will comply by setting higher	Choose level of compliance:

	minimum scores (see Attachment 4).	
More sophisticated forms of learning analytics mechanisms based on AI and specifically Machine Learning are encouraged to 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 expansion plans through increasing the academic distance learning portfolio and the number of online students.	We take serious note of the recommendation of the EEC. This suggestion will be discussed with the e-Learning Training and Development Unit for further actions. The Senate has already launched an open discussion process regarding how to engage with AI technologies in a creative manner that would maximize benefit and minimize cost stemming from AI revolution.	Choose level of compliance:

5. Learning resources and student support
(ESG 1.6)

The MA has been considered to be fully compliant in all criteria of this section, with one exception where it was deemed to be partially compliant. No major deficiencies in the quality indicators have been identified.

The EEC has confirmed that the overall support that is available to students and staff was satisfactory. This includes both the online and offline resources, including some wider enhancements to the learning experience, like access to the library support and the interactive activities supported by the Moodle platform. The courses in the program have a comprehensive syllabus and a weekly study guide that includes important information such as learning objectives and outcomes, keywords, relevant bibliography, activities, and synopses.

The EEC further confirmed that the ePSU is considered a best practice, due to its structure, resources, infrastructures and services devoted to enhanced distance learning. The EEC believes that it can be a powerful support for guaranteeing and maintaining the quality of the provided teaching while providing a good grounding for faculty members to face distance learning.

The EEC has further made suggestions for improvement. We address each one herein.

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
Based on the sample of the study guide provided, the EEC recommends to include more information to effectively guide online students through the course, such as a detailed learning and assessment methodology and recommended study time, which is very convenient for online students with limited time to plan their study. In addition, the EEC would like to highlight the lack of consistency of the study guides, with some of them providing only a minimum information while others are very informative. The EEC would like to draw attention to this point, so that the program will update the study guides following these recommendations.	The recommendation of the EEC is carefully taken into account. The course outlines always include details regarding assessment methodology. Such information is also included in the assessment guides, in more detail. The EEC reviewed only the syllabi, which indeed do not include these details. This is because course outlines are generated for the needs of a course per semester and the EEC did not have the chance to review an ongoing course because the program currently runs only in Greek. The EEC can find samples of a Course Outline and an Assessment Guide attached (Attachment 5 and Attachment 6). In compliance with the EEC's comment, the Department will launch a process of updating and enriching the Study Guides in Fall 2023, in such a way as to provide consistency across courses.	Choose level of compliance:

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In addition, the EEC recommends providing a clear indication of the relevant parts of the entire volumes in the study guides to be studied in order to make them more manageable for part-time students. The inclusion of a detailed learning methodology and recommended study time in the study guide can also be helpful in guiding online students through the course.	The recommendation is well-taken. Specific parts of required textbooks per week are already included in the study guides. If some of them do not comply with this requirement they will be corrected at the update process (see comment above). Detailed learning methodology is already included in the course outline and the assessment guide (see above).	Choose level of compliance:
The EEC encourages the university to consider extending scholarships to distance learning students as well. In this program in particular, it would be very useful to be able to offer a small number of (partial) scholarships in a targeted way to students from lower-income countries in the eastern Mediterranean/ME region. Their perspectives should be present in the classroom of a program focused on the region.	The Department agrees with this comment. We are already preparing a promotion campaign that will include targeted scholarships also for DL students.	Choose level of compliance:
The EEC recommends that the university should continue to encourage and incentivize teaching staff to develop and incorporate innovative teaching practices that promote interaction, engagement, collaboration and active learning in their distance learning courses. To this end, the EEC suggests that the ePSU should provide clear guidelines and procedures for the implementation and evaluation of teaching innovations. This will ensure that any teaching innovation is effectively incorporated into the distance learning process and evaluated for its effectiveness.	We endorse this recommendation. The Department will transfer this comment to ePSU so that it can be implemented immediately.	Choose level of compliance:
Finally, the program indicates that it would like to create stronger relations with its alumni. This is, of course, a challenge for any DL program. However, given the	This is an excellent recommendation, and we will definitely aim to implement it. We note that this needs further discussion with the School of Law and the appropriate organs	Choose level of compliance:

regional focus of the program and the relative proximity of most of its students, it might be considered to organize on-location alumni reunions at regular intervals (perhaps every 3-5 years). Also students who followed the program online might very well be curious to visit Cyprus at some point for an alumni reunion. Doing so would then automatically strengthen their connection to the program.	of the University in order to identify the best ways in which the recommendation can be properly implemented.	

6. Additional for doctoral programmes
(ALL ESG)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
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7. Eligibility (Joint programme)
(ALL ESG)

Areas of improvement and recommendations **by EEC**	Actions Taken by the Institution	For Official Use ONLY
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B. Conclusions and final remarks

We wish to thank the EEC for the professionalism they showed during the execution of their duties. The detailed discussion of all issues pertinent to the degree under evaluation, led to a fruitful discussion between the members of the EEC and the official representatives of the University and faculty members of the programme. The discussion proved to be extremely helpful due to the expertise of the members of the EEC and their willingness to share their suggestions and recommendations for further improving the programme. The demanding set of questions allowed us to elaborate on specialized aspects and deep foundations of the Programme and expand upon the content of the application form.

We have assessed and reviewed carefully the EEC report. We are pleased to note that the report is very positive, and we thank the EEC for their remarks and conclusions that are very supportive of the Programme. As indicated the Programme is already a very well-functioning one. The EEC pointed out that the additional suggestions made can be a source of inspiration in the program in the coming years, acknowledging that some of them do not aim to immediate implementation. It was pointed out that the EEC felt welcome at the University of Nicosia, and felt a spirit of open exchange that allowed them to develop an informed impression of the program. They encountered a committed and collegial teaching staff and program coordinator and an attentive management at School and University levels, spoke to students and alumni whose enthusiasm was palpable, even as they were physically remote.

We fully acknowledge that all programmes are always amenable to further improvement, and indeed we have been constantly working towards further improving our Programme since it was initially accredited. Accordingly, the suggestions for further improvement offered by the EEC are taken very seriously into account. We consider the suggestions of the EEC as very helpful and we will try to incorporate them to the widest extent possible. We thank once more the Committee for all the suggestions/recommendations, and address each concluding remark herein.

We would like to thank the committee once more, both for the positive and fair evaluation, as well as the constructive comments and suggestions and the fruitful discussion that we had with its members during the visit. We also thank the committee for the time and thoroughness it dedicated to the evaluation of the MA and for helping us improve the Programme through the suggestions made. All recommendations of the committee refer to further improvement, and some need discussion and potential decision at Senate level as they are not applicable only to this specific Programme. The recommendations and evaluation of the committee are seriously taken into account for the further improvement of the Programme. We consider this endorsement under the conditions of external peer review as a resounding vote of confidence in the MA and its potential for academic success.

We finally acknowledge the clear positive evaluation and recommendation for accreditation of the MA.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Achilles C. Emilianides	Professor, Dean	
Christina Ioannou	Associate Professor, Associate Dean	
Andreas Theophanous	Professor, Head of the Department	
Michalis Kontos	Assistant Professor, MA Programme Coordinator	

Date: 19/7/2023