

Doc. 300.1.2

Date: 03 June 2022

Higher Education Institution's Response

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

In Greek:

Ψηφιακά Μέσα και Επικοινωνία (1,5 έτος, 90 ECTS, Μάστερ)

In English:

Digital Media and Communications (1,5 years, 90 ECTS, Master of Arts)

- **Language(s) of instruction:** English
- **Programme's status:** Currently operating
- **Concentrations (if any):** None

In Greek: Concentrations

In English: Concentrations

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 2021 [L.136(I)/2015 – L.132(I)/2021].

A. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The Higher Education Institution (HEI) based on the External Evaluation Committee's (EEC's) evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4) must justify whether actions have been taken in improving the quality of the programme of study in each assessment area.*
- *In particular, under each assessment area, the HEI must respond on, without changing the format of the report:*
 - *the findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations of the EEC*
 - *the conclusions and final remarks noted by the EEC*
- *The HEI's response must follow below the EEC's comments, which must be copied from the external evaluation report (Doc.300.1.1 or 300.1.1/2 or 300.1.1/3 or 300.1.1/4).*
- *In case of annexes, those should be attached and sent on a separate document.*

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

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

Findings

The university has established quality assurance processes that are transparent and inclusive. Such processes and policies underpin the on-going review and development of all three programmes. Teaching and administrative staff were aware of the relevant policies and procedures. In addition to the formal mechanisms, the Committee noted evidence of informal mechanisms that supported staff in their endeavours to deliver quality teaching. While from the discussions with both staff and students, it has become apparent that respect to diversity and an inclusive approach is adopted, it is not clear whether there is a clear policy/clause on discrimination and/or harassment. Overall, the Committee felt that the programmes featured appropriate learning objectives at the programme level (all programmes). When it came to the taught modules of the proposed BA and MA programmes, a good mixture of theoretical and practical modules is provided to the students. It is clear to the EEC committee that the programme developers have kept in touch with developments in the field of study. ECTs are clearly defined signalling the corresponding student workload in all programmes. The practice around the definition of ECTs is along the expected lines. The EEC notes evidence of internal programme development at both the module and programme level, aiming to ensure that the programme content remains up to date. The programs are also now supported by a recently renovated studio and relevant equipment keeping it in line with the latest developments. The Department has policies in place guarding against academic fraud. Admissions criteria are in line with the EEC expectations. Moreover, it was clear from the discussions that the Department takes advantage of the good and productive relations that the staff maintains with external stakeholders.

Findings for MA

Overall, the design of the programme, curriculum structure and assessments are stretching students to develop independence, knowledge, understanding and critical analytic skills. The programme is up-to-date incorporating modules that deal with the digital dimension and the way it has been transforming the study and the practice of Public Relations. The staff is extremely qualified to deliver this program on high standards. In the academic design of the programme, the EEC committee would like to draw the attention on an area of concern related to the methodology course offering and the MA thesis. As things stand, the methods module and the MA thesis are electives. This is highly unusual compared to other relevant programmes in European and American universities. A taught module on methods is a necessary course that helps students familiarize themselves with the purpose and value and the ethics of research and goes on to address qualitative/quantitative research methods. In addition, it seems imperative that students who wish to opt for writing a thesis should be acquainted with research methods. Since the Department also runs and aims to expand its PhD program, and the MA degree as stated in their application may well serve as a pool for perspective students, it only seems natural that these students should be well equipped to continue their studies on a doctoral level. Moreover, there are unclear guidelines with regards to the PT delivery of the program. From the discussions with the teaching staff, the EEC committee understands that there is a system of extensions in place to facilitate students, but it is not clear whether this is a general policy or a PT delivery mode bespoke one.

Strengths for MA

An overall very well-designed curriculum (with the weaknesses mentioned above). Healthy cohorts consisted of both national and international students. The teaching staff is research active and students are presented with various opportunities to participate in various research activities (for e.g., conference attendance) and research-led teaching.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for MA

“The EEC committee urges the Department to rectify the deficiency in required methodology offering. The EEC strongly recommends that, even if an MA thesis is not a pre-requisite for MAs in Cyprus, that the Research Methods module become a pre-requisite for those students who wish to undertake writing a thesis. This should be clearly communicated to the students at the beginning of the program and also be clearly stated in the relevant module descriptors. With regards to the PT mode of delivery of the programme: If this is a formal mode of delivery, then this needs to be formally communicated at all channels of communication, and there is also need for a well-designed plan of the sequence of modules for the Part Time program (modules/ECTS per semester). Finally, the EEC would like to recommend the drafting of clearer and more formalized instructions and guidelines for the MA Thesis module (duration of oral presentation and structure, marking criteria etc).”

Response

The EEC has found the programme to be compliant with most criteria in all sections and has noted that the programme has a well-designed curriculum and highly qualified teaching staff in accordance with international standards. And we appreciate the EEC’s affirmation. Also, we thank the EEC for identifying areas of improvement for the programme and making relevant recommendations to achieve further success.

Regarding the course of research methodology, we appreciate the EEC’s suggestion and consider it to be of vital importance. As a result, following the successful completion of the current Re-Accreditation Process, a Research Methods course will be a requirement for all students on the MA, beginning Fall 2022. We have considered making the Thesis mandatory but concluded to allow students, for the time being as a transition period, to have the following option: students not taking the Thesis will be required to take more credits as taught courses instead. Most students in the program are practitioners or wish to enter professions in the media and communication industry. They are interested to deepen into various subject matters in digital media and communication rather than focus on just one particular theme. Furthermore, we prefer to give a choice to our students because it is a common practice among MA programs at our university. This decision will be reviewed when the Department conducts the next “Internal Programme Evaluation Process” (IPEP) process (within two years). It should be noted that the current University policy across Cyprus (set by the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education) is that the thesis is not mandatory in Master-level programmes. The MA in Digital Media and Communications has abided by this policy in order to offer flexibility that responds to the needs of the local and international market. A large number of our MA students are mature practitioners or wish to enter professions in the media and communication industry who appreciate the flexibility and knowledge offered through the elective courses.

Nonetheless we recognise the value of the thesis element: students will be strongly encouraged to take up the thesis option.

Regarding PT delivery of the programme, the program is in full compliance with the university’s regulations of FT delivery of all programs except PT students in the program have the option of taking less than three courses per semester. Students are classified further according to the number of semester hours/ECTS in which they are enrolled per semester. A student is considered full-time if enrolled for 30 ECTS during a semester or 15 ECTS during the summer session. Enrolment for fewer ECTS is considered part-time. For migration purposes the full-time status can be defined on the number of teaching hours and not on the number of ECTS and depends also on the level (Cycle) of the programme of study.

Finally, we will provide more guidelines for the MA thesis including specifying the duration of the oral presentation. At the present, the oral presentation of student thesis is typically set at 60 minutes,

consisting of a 30-minute student presentation of the thesis and a 30-minute question-and-answer session between the student and the evaluation committee of three faculty members with relevant expertise.

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

Findings for MA

The EEC found that the teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology for the program was of a good standard. Instructors were flexible on their use of available pedagogical technologies, there was a strong linkage of practical and theoretical components and student assessment criteria were transparent.

Strengths for MA

Instructors showed a clear flexibility in their teaching when faced with COVID, adapting instruction to online without a major disruption or drop in student satisfaction.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for MA

While teaching practices are good, as has been noted in other sections, the MA program needs to establish continuity for those choosing to write a thesis by making research methodologies (or similar) a requirement for thesis writing. The lack of such a requirement makes the learning outcomes for the MA thesis (related to research skill) difficult to reach.

Response

The EEC has noted that the programme has demonstrated sufficient, effective teaching practices. We appreciate the EEC's observation and encouragement. With regard to the course of research methodology, as explained above, the program will adopt the EEC's suggestion of making the course a required/mandatory course, beginning Fall 2022.

3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

Findings for MA

Based on discussions and meetings with faculty members and students, and on attending a graduate course on Gender and Communication we discovered well-trained, knowledgeable, and inspired academic staff.

Strengths for MA

High efficacy of teaching, understanding of positive or negative results.

Areas of improvement and recommendations for MA

Feedback given to faculty members by alumni (especially those who have strong bonds with the industry) and stakeholders regarding teaching and research results need to be analysed. Future graduate-level expansion of the department will likely mean the need for additional staff, and this increase needs to be accounted for in future planning and recruitment, as well as in economic forecasts for departmental budgeting.

Response

The EEC has found the programme to be compliant with all criteria of this section and noted that the programme has been designed according to international standards. And we appreciate the EEC's recognition of the research expertise and teaching practice of the faculty as well as recommendations for further improvement. The program will further collaborate with the relevant offices/units of the university, including the Student Affairs Department in better tracking post-graduation employment among alumni and associated feedback on the program. Moreover, the program will consider the EEC's helpful suggestions in future planning when the need for additional staff arises. We note the comment that this a key area of improvement, and this will be a future consideration, if and when such need arises.

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

Findings

In general, student admission, progression, recognition and certification work smoothly for all three programs, and all the necessary mechanisms and procedures are in place. Admissions criteria, procedures relevant to Transfer students and Transfer credits were clearly stated in the applications, the relevant material that was sent for review to the EEC, and the online presentations.

Strengths

University of Nicosia is an established institution in the higher education sector of Cyprus and its expertise is evidenced in its clear procedures for admission, progression, recognition, and certification. Additionally, the programme uses ECTS credits for each course, which demonstrates the commitment to European standards, and allows for recognition of attended courses outside Cyprus.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

NA

Response

The EEC has found the programme to be compliant with all criteria of this section and noted that the programme has been designed according to European standards. And we appreciate the EEC's observation and recognition.

5. Learning resources and student support (ESG 1.6)

Findings for MA

The EEC found that the various levels of support for students, teaching resources, physical spaces and human resources support were of a high quality across all areas of the department.

Strengths

A particular strength of the department was the availability of production studios where students could engage in practical work. This strength was amplified by the integration of this practical work with theoretical components.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

N/A

Response

The EEC has found the programme to be compliant with all criteria of this section and noted that the programme has been designed according to high quality standards. We thank the EEC for identifying and affirming the unique strengths of the programme in the areas of learning resources and student support. The EEC highlights the state-of-the-art facilities and infrastructure that support the delivery of practical work with theoretical components. Once again, we appreciate the EEC's recognition and encouragement.

6. Additional for doctoral programmes
(ALL ESG)

7. Eligibility (Joint programme) *(ALL ESG)*

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B. Conclusions and final remarks

General Comments

The task of the EEC was to evaluate the following programs in the Department of Communications at the University of Nicosia: (1) BA in Digital Communications and Mass Media; (2) MA in Digital Media and Communications, and (3) Ph.D. in Media and Communications. This Conclusions section will begin with general remarks on the overall impression of the EEC in relation to the program, and conclude with specific comments and recommendations for improvement and/or change.

The EEC considered the BA, MA and Ph.D. programs to be largely run in an organized, logical and pedagogically constructive fashion. The progression of courses and the learning outcomes were clear and for the BA and MA components there was an intellectually and pedagogically sound integration of what we might describe as “theory” and “practice” (while recognizing that this can be seen as a problematic or counter-productive distinction). The teaching staff are well qualified for their positions, with production staff holding valuable professional experience and research staff demonstrating an ability to produce high-quality research at an international standard. The quality of teaching at all three levels – BA, MA and Ph.D. – is secured by a well organized and transparent system of student evaluation, and the students interviewed expressed a clear satisfaction with the quality of the education, the interaction and feedback from staff and the university administration. The overall impression of the EEC in relation to the three programs was that they (overall) held a good international standard, but that there were some issues at the graduate (MA) and postgraduate (Ph.D.) levels that need to be addressed, and that separated the BA program from the graduate programs. In addition, there were several issues that impacted the entire department where the EEC is offering suggestions/Recommendations. In the next section we will list out recommendations for all programs, as well as program-specific recommendations.

Recommendation for MA Program Recommendation 1: The EEC considers it to be of particular importance that the MA program make it a REQUIREMENT that students take a preparatory Methods/Research Design course before writing an MA thesis. The lack of this requirement, at present, weakens the MA program, as research design and methodology is a central element of MA education. Recommendation 2: While recognizing that a thesis isn't required by law, the EEC recommends that MA students be required to write an MA thesis in order to obtain an MA degree. A thesis is a standard international examination requirement and tool for measuring education quality, especially as MA degrees intended to add a clear research dimension above and beyond the BA level. And MA is also a stepping-stone to Ph.D. work, and without a thesis it is unclear how such a progression can be justified. Without a thesis, the EEC considers the MA programs to be weakened. Recommendation 3: Students in the MA program should be given the opportunity to have practical experience factored into their degree program (such as internships accompanied by a rigorous written reflection upon the relationship between the practice and theoretical implications).

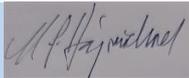
Response

We thank the Committee for the thoughtful and thorough review of the program and all aspects of its functioning. We are pleased to receive such a positive evaluation, and we are grateful for the constructive feedback and suggestions that have been made as well as for the engaging and fruitful discussion we had with members of the EEC during the visit. We would like to highlight that the EEC has found the program to be compliant with the CYQAA's Standards in most areas and subareas of programme functioning, especially concerning quality of the teaching staff, teaching practice, student learning resources and support as well as student admission, progression and recognition. We consider the ECC's overall feedback a recognition of a good quality program with unique strengths and in accordance with European standards.

As stated in our responses above, we respect and are willing to adopt the suggestions and recommendations made by the EEC. Some of the suggestions have already been implemented while others

will be implemented starting with the next cycle of admissions in Fall 2022. Specifically, with regard to the course of research methodology, the program will implement the EEC's suggestion of making the course a required/mandatory course. With regard to the Thesis, the program will consider making it a requirement in consultation of relevant regulations by external and internal regulating bodies within the university during the next IPEP process. We certainly understand that requirement of thesis may potentially foster interest among students in pursuing a Ph.D. program, hence, increasing recruitment for our Ph.D. program. Finally, we appreciate the EEC's observation and recognition of the program encouraging practical work with rigorous theoretical underpinning. Abiding relevant laws in Cyprus, Internship/practicum will not be included in the program; however, we will still encourage student creation of practical work with theoretical components through course assessment.

C. Higher Education Institution academic representatives

Name	Position	Signature
Tao Papaioannou	Program coordinator	
Prof Klimis Mastoridis	Dean	
Dr. Mike Hajimichael	PhD Programme Coordinator	
Click to enter Name	Click to enter Position	
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Click to enter Name	Click to enter Position	

Date: 03 June 2022