

Doc. 300.1.1

Date: 11 December 2024

External Evaluation Report (Conventional-face-to-face programme of study)

- **Higher Education Institution:**
European University of Cyprus
- **Town:** Nicosia
- **School/Faculty (if applicable):** School of Medicine,
School of Sciences
- **Department/ Sector:** Interdepartmental
- **Programme of study- Name Programme 1 – PhD in
Public Health (3 years /6 semesters/ - 180 ECTS,
Doctor of Philosophy)**
- **Language(s) of instruction:** Greek, English
- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating

The present document has been prepared within the framework of the authority and competencies of the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education, according to the provisions of the “Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education and the Establishment and Operation of an Agency on Related Matters Laws” of 2015 to 2021 [L.136(I)/2015 – L.132(I)/2021].

A. Introduction

This EEC has visited the European University of Cyprus in December 2024. The purpose of the visit was re-accreditation of the Programme PhD in Public Health. The previous external evaluation had taken place in February 2020. The PhD programme was started in 2013. The University has developed an interdepartmental PhD programme in 2019, by collaboration of two Schools, Medicine and Sciences. The 2020 EEC has made suggestions concerning admission rules and final assessment. These suggestions by the 2020 EC were implemented immediately by the Schools.

Upon the EEC's request the Schools replied on 06.12.2024,: “As of semester Spring 2024, the University via the Office of the Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, is in the process of revising and further aligning different regulations of all doctoral programmes offered at EUC, in order to be further aligned with national requirements and international guidelines and practices. In this process, an alternative thesis structure was adopted as an option (compilation of papers) and publication requirements were revised to reflect the quality and scientific rigour that we strive to adopt in the programme”.

The EEC has met online and discussed in preparation for the visit, concentrating on the process initiated during the EEC 2020 visit and the ensuing documents.

Our site visit was well prepared by the CYQAA. We had meetings with

- Vice Rector of Academic Affairs & Vice Rector of Research & External Affairs;
- Members of the Internal Evaluation Committee;
- Head of the relevant department and the Coordinator(s) of the programme;
- Head of the relevant department and the Coordination Committee of the programme;
- Members of the teaching staff on each course for all the years of study;
- Students and graduates of the PhD programme only, with some joining from remote places via videoconferencing
- Members of the administrative staff only;
- External Stakeholders only;
- Heads of the relevant department, the coordinators of the programme and the Directors of Academic Quality and Compliance.

The atmosphere in the discussions was welcoming and friendly, and we are thanking all those who participated and those who organised invisibly.

In our report, we are trying to triangulate between the written documentation and what was observed and said in numerous conversations. In each regard, our visit was a very pleasant experience.

External Evaluation Committee (EEC)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>University</i>
Marta Aymerich	Chairwoman	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Giuseppe La Torre	Member	Sapienza University of Rome
Matthias Siebeck	Member	Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich
Pavlos Petrou	Student Member	University of Cyprus

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

Sub-areas

- 1.1 Policy for quality assurance**
- 1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review**
- 1.3 Public information**
- 1.4 Information management**

Findings

Policy for quality assurance of the programme is a part of the strategic management of the programme. Its design considers institutional strategy, with clear programme objectives and explicit intended learning outcomes.

The curriculum connects course aims and objectives through comprehensive mapping, involving students and other stakeholders in its development, such as the Ministry of Health and the Cyprus Scientific Society of Public Health, taking into account their feedback.

The programme management employs an approach to collecting and analysing information, using specific indicators such as student satisfaction through surveys.

Strengths

The programme strategically fosters synergy between Health Sciences and Medicine Departments, integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives to enhance the doctoral training.

The programme demonstrates a commitment to external stakeholder involvement by developing a curriculum that bridges academic research with public health professional practice needs in Cyprus.

The programme attracts doctoral candidates from various health-related fields, promoting interdisciplinary perspectives.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Regarding the design, to ensure comprehensive coverage of distinctive public health research topics that clearly distinguish the field from adjacent health research domains, we recommend implementing a comprehensive initial assessment of students' public health competencies. See Section D – Conclusions and final remarks.

The programme benefits from external expertise, and could benefit more by inviting international reviewers as members of the doctoral committees.

Although the programme is transparent in the selection criteria, it must make also public in the website more documentation about the doctoral programme, that is, detailed information on learning outcomes, qualification details, teaching and assessment procedures, pass rates, and graduate employment data.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
1.1	Policy for quality assurance	Compliant
1.2	Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review	Compliant
1.3	Public information	Partially compliant
1.4	Information management	Compliant

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

Sub-areas

2.1 Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology

2.2 Practical training

2.3 Student assessment

Findings

The size of groups in training is adequate for effective teaching and learning. The students are highly motivated to achieve knowledge and skills to their future work. The students are actively involved in further improvement of the learning environment.

Strengths

The numerical *faculty:student* ratio is adequate, the faculty members can be easily accessed by the students. Teachers do not hesitate to provide one-on-one support when necessary. The needs of those students who are working full-time are given consideration. The Schools have hired two new programme coordinators who are highly skilled and enthusiastic and have pushed the programme forward.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Programme learning outcomes and profile of the future graduate should be amended regarding the teaching competences of the students. More elaboration is provided in the final section of this document, Section D - Conclusions and final remarks.

Based on comments of the previous external evaluation, the Schools have changed the requirements for final exam and graduation. Based on advice from the University, a new set of rules for requirements for final exam and graduation was decided (Phase 3). The EEC gives specific advice in the final section of this document, Section D -Conclusions and final remarks.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
2.1	Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology	Compliant
2.2	Practical training	Compliant
2.3	Student assessment	Partially compliant

3. Teaching staff (ESG 1.5)

Sub-areas

3.1 Teaching staff recruitment and development

3.2 Teaching staff number and status

3.3 Synergies of teaching and research

Findings

Concerning teaching staff recruitment and development, the following elements can be underlined:

- EUC ensures the competence of its teaching staff. There is a process of ongoing learning for using methodology in teaching, also using the artificial intelligence in the learning activities. The teaching staff is regularly engaged in professional and teaching-skills training and development.
- The processes for the recruitment and development of the teaching staff seems to be adequate and clearly indicated in the report.
- The teaching staff qualifications seems to be adequate for the following courses:
 - PHE 705. Advanced Methods in Epidemiology and biostatistics. In this course the use of the open source R programme is considered mandatory and this can be reasonable for several reasons, especially for the free use and for the autonomy for future careers of the PhD students.
 - PHE 710. Applied research skills in which they teach how to prepare a manuscript, how to make an answer to the reviewers' comments, how to make a presentation in a conference.
- Concerning the first course PHE700 Advanced research methodology, this is mainly based on Epidemiological methodology, and the staff seems to be not entirely adequate, at least in terms of seniority. The teachers involved in the Epidemiological teaching are a young associate professor, and young assistant professors.
- For all these courses, in the website of the EUC there is no information on learning outcomes. (<https://euc.ac.cy/en/programs/doctorate-public-health/#tab-program-of-study>)
- The research activity of the teaching staff seems to be adequate, even if it does not cover all the domain of Public health. There is attention to the development of their teaching skills. On the other hand, no indication is given on the teachers' mobility.
- There is evidence of the presence of innovation in teaching methods, especially involving the use of new technologies and artificial intelligence.
- Recognised visiting teaching staff participates in teaching the study programme. In the site visit we were aware about public health guest lecture series that involve some well-reputed researchers at the international level, such as Prof. Ioannidis, Prof. Tsiodras and Dr. Loenhout.

As far as concerns teaching staff number and status, the standards are fully considered.

- The number of the teaching staff seems to be adequate to support the programme of study, considering that the average number of students admitted every year is 4.2 .
- The teaching staff status is appropriate to offer a quality programme of study.
- Visiting staff teachers are not prevalent if compared to the number of the permanent staff.

Concerning the synergies of teaching and research, the following elements can be reported:

- The teaching staff collaborates in the fields of teaching and research within the HEI in Cyprus and with partners outside. There is evidence of the participation to the activities of the European Public Health Associations (EUPHA) and Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER).
- The teaching staff publications are within the discipline, even if some important issues (i.e. tobacco smoking, alcohol) are not covered (c.f. Compliance rating for Subarea 3.3).
- The studies carried out by the teaching staff are closely related to the programme's courses, and this is witnessed by their publications.

The allocation of teaching hours compared to the time for research activity seems to be adequate.

Strengths

- Enthusiastic approach to the teaching activities among all the teaching staff involved in the evaluation.
- Active participation to the Cyprus Epidemiology and Public Health Association (CyEPHA).
- Contribution to National Strategies / Action Plans on different Public Health issues.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

The research activities must fit the health at the population level in Cyprus. It is strongly recommended to use the State of Health in the EU – Cyprus - Country Health Profile 2021 (https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/2021_chp_cyprus_english.pdf) as a guide to develop future activities that can have an impact on relevant stakeholders (Ministry of health, Local health authorities, Schools).

As a consequence of the above mentioned, the public health issues in which the research activities are carried out by the teachers do not cover all the fields of public health. So, the recommendation is to increase the research activities on the following public health issues:

- Tobacco smoking
- Alcohol consumption and abuse
- Cancer epidemiology

Some of this activities can be carried out also with strong collaboration at the international level. Higher attention must be given to the development and implementation of cohort studies as well as case-control studies.

Give relevant information on the learning objectives of the courses that are delivered in the PhD programme, as well as the contents and textbooks, at least on the website of the EUC.

Increase the number of recognised visiting teaching staff.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
3.1	Teaching staff recruitment and development	Partially compliant
3.2	Teaching staff number and status	Compliant
3.3	Synergies of teaching and research	Partially compliant

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

Sub-areas

4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria

4.2 Student progression

4.3 Student recognition

4.4 Student certification

Findings

The School has changed the admission requirements following the recommendations given by the EEC in 2020. Applicants with Bachelor's degree only cannot be admitted to the programme any longer.

Strengths

Many students come from a variety of professional backgrounds, other than public health. This diversity is a big strength.

Master level training is a prerequisite now.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

As stated under Strengths, the diversity of the students is something that needs to be preserved. However, this comes at a cost, and that is the lack of a pre-existing knowledge in public health of those students from backgrounds other than public health. The solution that was chosen before the visit of the EEC in 2020 was to prescribe mandatory courses in Public Health from the Master's programme. That solution had to be given up because it was not compatible with the Bologna process.

An alternative could be to administer an entry assessment in the area of Public Health, and admit applicants to the PhD programme only after passing the test, or after completing learning activities to fill the existing learning needs. For applicants with Master's degree in Public Health no longer than 3 years before the application the test could be voluntary.

EEC is aware of a similar, but weaker, statement on the website, section on admission.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
4.1	Student admission, processes and criteria	Partially compliant
4.2	Student progression	Compliant
4.3	Student recognition	NA
4.4	Student certification	NA

5. Learning resources and student support (ESG 1.6)

Sub-areas

5.1 Teaching and Learning resources

5.2 Physical resources

5.3 Human support resources

5.4 Student support

Findings

The Interdepartmental PhD Programme in Public Health demonstrates a comprehensive approach to resource management and student support. The programme has developed a strategy to meet the diverse needs of doctoral candidates, with particular attention to creating a flexible and supportive learning environment.

The programme's resource allocation strategy considers the heterogeneous background of its student population, encompassing professionals from various health-related disciplines. Efforts have been made to provide adaptable teaching and learning resources that can accommodate evolving educational and quality requirements.

Strengths

The programme has developed a student-centred approach that prioritizes flexible learning modes, ensuring accessibility for diverse student profiles, including part-time, employed, and international doctoral candidates.

The Schools physical resources, including IT infrastructure, study facilities, and University library resources, demonstrate a commitment to creating an environment that supports public health doctoral research. The resources are designed to be adaptable to changing academic demands.

The use of R as a tool for didactic purposes seems to be relevant for the PhD candidates, since it develops their autonomy in carrying out statistical analysis.

The EUC is offering free of charge psychological and counselling services to the members, both staff and students. PhD students are very aware of it and know how to use it.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

Given the rather small number of PhD student admission rate, the programme can benefit from developing a more systematic approach to anticipating and responding to potential fluctuations in student numbers, ensuring consistent resource adequacy across different scenarios.

Regarding funding resources, a limited national research funding may hinder large-scale, high-quality doctoral research projects. Actively seeking international grants and industry partnerships could address this.

In addition, to include in the programme student training to write research proposals based on European and international templates can be an added value for future public health researchers, as well as exploring alternative funding models.

Recognizing the heightened mental health challenges faced by doctoral students, particularly their increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression, the EEC emphasizes the critical importance of exceptional mentoring capabilities for all faculty members. To address these challenges, we recommend comprehensive professional development that equips faculty with essential skills in mentoring, pedagogical approaches, and advanced supervision techniques.

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
5.1	Teaching and Learning resources	Compliant
5.2	Physical resources	Compliant
5.3	Human support resources	Compliant
5.4	Student support	Compliant

6. Additional for doctoral programmes (ALL ESG)

Sub-areas

6.1 Selection criteria and requirements

6.2 Proposal and dissertation

6.3 Supervision and committees

Findings

The requirements of the doctoral degree programme are clear and well presented in the website of the PhD programme.

Specific and clear guidelines for the writing of the proposal and the dissertation are set and presented in the website of the PhD programme.

The rules for assuring the scientific quality of the PhD thesis have been recently changed. However, some room for improvement does still exist.

Strengths

The access to psychology counselling is very important to cope with mental health issues of the PhD candidates, especially in the first part of their career.

The use of the Turnitin tool is very important to check for similarities and avoid plagiarism.

Areas of improvement and recommendations

There must be a stronger link between the doctoral programmes of study and the society, especially based on research activities established as a priority at the national level.

The maximum time of completing the programme must be revised. The recommendation is that the programme lasts maximum 4 years (c.f. Compliance rating for Subarea 6.1).

For the publication requirements for PhD Public Health graduates, if the ambition of the School is to become an international player, the option "1 peer-reviewed publication" must be avoided. The recommendation is that only the option "3 peer-review publication" must be in place (c.f. Compliance rating for Subarea 6.2).

Please select what is appropriate for each of the following sub-areas:

Sub-area		<i>Non-compliant/ Partially Compliant/Compliant</i>
6.1	Selection criteria and requirements	Partially compliant



6.2	Proposal and dissertation	Partially compliant
6.3	Supervision and committees	Compliant

B. Conclusions and final remarks

Regarding the requirements for Graduation, we learnt that over the years there were 3 different phases of the PhD in PH programme,

1. Initial accreditation phase (Fall 2013 – Spring 2020)
2. Second accreditation (Fall 2020 – Spring 2025)
3. Third accreditation (Fall 2025-onwards). Current accreditation process.

It must be made sure that none of the candidates who matriculated a few years ago is allowed to graduate according to the old requirements for graduation, assessment and awarding the PhD. If the programme allows graduation after 9 years then there can be no conservation of standards of the past.

The EEC thinks that Conference Presentations are not an adequate substitute for a peer-reviewed publication in an international journal of a non-predatory publisher. It is still important for a student to present and discuss at a conference.

A “Strong recommendation”, as used in the First Phase, is ineffective. The expression “should”, as it appeared in Phase 2 code, is an invitation to use an open shortcut, and some humans will take the shortcut. “should” must be avoided and replaced by “must” if you want to establish clear and unequivocal quality standards.

The draft for Phase 3 includes an option for an extended comprehensive dissertation plus one (1) peer-reviewed publication in an international journal as a first author. The description contains the word “should” twice. The EEC recommends deleting the word “should” and replacing it with “must”. When comparing this option with international standards, a monograph or book or extended comprehensive dissertation is obsolete, and a single peer-reviewed journal article is insufficient. If EUC aspires to be an international player, this option should be excluded.

The draft for Phase 3 includes a second option to use a collection of 3 published articles. The word “should” appears three times in the criteria. The EEC recommends deleting the word “should” and replacing it with “must”. Furthermore, the EEC suggests to add the requirement of a brief introduction (less than 5 pages) that is putting the three (or more) original papers into context, rather than paraphrasing the papers.

The EEC is sceptical regarding the criterion of “Q1 or Q2 Scopus ranking” as the sole way of determining academic quality. Scopus ranking is a metric for journals, not for articles in journals. Please allow us to use a metaphor: it is like measuring the size of the box rather than the quality of the apples in it.

Publication in predatory journals must not be acceptable, and that should be made known.

Evaluation of scientific research is one of the top cognitive abilities of a scientist. It may be convenient to do so, but it cannot be true that academic institutions delegate the responsibility for evaluation of scientific research to an agent with purely monetary interest and no expertise in measuring quality of research. Remember, Scopus does not hold a PhD in Public health, it is just a proprietary algorithm.

EEC had the impression from the discussion that the Faculty was treating this as a controversial issue. Instead of prescribing a solution, EEC suggests that the Faculty seeks external advice, and/or advice from the scientific literature and develops a plan.

Moreover, EEC is really convinced that researches conducted in Public Health at the population level need to be focused mainly on the health needs of the population. This means that it is strongly recommended to use the State of Health in the EU – Cyprus - Country Health Profile 2021 as a guide to develop future activities

that can have an impact on relevant stakeholders (Ministry of health, Local health authorities, Schools), especially for topics not covered or partially covered actually by EUC (i.e., tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption, cancer epidemiology).

The EEC strongly recommends to invite experts from other institutions to review the original articles and the thesis and thus contribute to the final assessment of the PhD candidates.

During the conversation with currently enrolled students and recent graduates, the EEC learnt that many of the graduates enjoy newly acquired teaching obligations. For some of them, the prospect of a teaching role was a motivating factor for them in taking up PhD studies. Furthermore, the EEC sees educating the public as one of the ordinary roles of a public health professional. But how can they without being trained for it. Weaknesses in public education and science communication became visible during the last pandemic, and in many countries, the public space was left to virologists. Teaching competence was not among the goals of EUC's PhD programme, teaching skills were not listed in the transversal skills of the programme. Therefore, the EEC suggests to include basic pedagogy training and pedagogical content knowledge for public health in the curriculum and the graduate profile. It should be noted that education is more than lecturing, and there are many opportunities for PhD students in public health to gain teaching experience.

Given the observation that PhD students are more susceptible to anxiety and depression than the general population, excellent mentoring skills are crucial for all teachers in the programme. All teachers involved must participate in training in mentoring skills, basic pedagogy, pedagogical content knowledge in public health, and skills of an excellent supervision.



C. Signatures of the EEC

<i>Name</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Matthias Siebeck	
Giuseppe La Torre	
Pavlos Petrou	
Marta Aymerich	

Date: 11 December 2024