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Date: 13 May 2023

# External Evaluation Report (E-learning programme of study)

- **Higher Education Institution:**  
University of Nicosia
- **Town:** Nicosia
- **School/Faculty (if applicable):** School of Law
- **Department/ Sector:** Department of Politics and Governance
- **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:** English, Greek
- **Programme's status:** Currently Operating
- **Concentrations (if any):**

**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. Introduction

*This part includes basic information regarding the onsite visit.*

In this introduction the EEC addresses three aspects that are special about this program: its nature as a Distance Learning (DL) mirror program of a conventional Master; the specificities of its DL delivery; and its recent substantive shift of focus to the eastern Mediterranean region.

First, the program evaluated in this report is the DL mirror program of a conventional on-site Master's program in International Relations and Eastern Mediterranean Studies. The DL program follows the same curriculum and is for the most part taught by the same teaching staff. What differs is the mode of delivery. The conventional mirror program was last evaluated in 2021. The DL program has run since 2017, and this is its first re-evaluation.

The University of Nicosia does self-consciously not pursue an Open University (fully DL) strategy. It focuses its DL offer on the Master's level and on joint programs (although the program evaluated here is not a joint one). The EEC agrees that it is an advantage for the DL programs to be run from a campus. The presence of on-location institutions and programs ensures that there is a core staff and a research base. Also, the functioning of the DL Administrative Unit, which is vital for the program, is supported by its on-campus existence.

The EEC, therefore, has some concern about the risk that conventional programs might be phased out due to their higher pricing and the resulting problem of attracting sufficient students. At this moment, the conventional program is offered only in English; the DL program is offered in both English and Greek, with most students enrolling in the Greek version.

In sum, the idea of mirroring on-site with DL-programs is inclusive of the needs of categories of students who would not be able to study on location, due to work, family, health, or financial reasons. However, it is advisable to continue the mirror conventional program. For both the conventional and the DL program it would be helpful to have more control over the fees students pay, and/or to be able to offer targeted (partial) scholarships, in order to be able to attract the intended mix and number of students.

Second, the EEC notes that for a DL program we see a relatively high amount of synchronicity as well as of synchronous and especially asynchronous interaction (student-teacher and teacher-student) in this program. The EEC finds this laudable practice and would like to give due praise to the teaching and coordinating staff of the program, who make this possible through their extra work and commitment. In addition, the EEC is impressed by the strong support structure in place that both enables teaching staff to do this technically challenging work and guides students in a very hands-on manner through their program.

Third, the program has applied a shift from covering all of Europe to focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean. That makes much sense to the EEC, given the location of the university, the interests of the staff, and the countries of origin of most of its students. However, there is currently a shortage of staff expertise on the Middle East. There is a great potential to profile the program as a top program on the region that can bring together academics, policy-makers, and practitioners. In order for this potential not to be lost, it is important to quickly achieve a good balance of expertise across the region, including its contemporary development and challenges.

## B. External Evaluation Committee (EEC)

<i><b>Name</b></i>	<i><b>Position</b></i>	<i><b>University</b></i>
Prof. Annette Freyberg-Inan	Chair	University of Amsterdam
Prof. Vivi Kefala	Member	University of the Aegean
Prof. Emma Murphy	Member	Durham University
Prof. Santi Caballe Llobet	Member	Open University of Catalonia
Ms. Anna Tzamantaki	Student member	University of Cyprus
<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>University</b>

## C. Guidelines on content and structure of the report

- *The external evaluation report follows the structure of assessment areas.*
- *At the beginning of each assessment area there is a box presenting:*
  - (a) *sub-areas*
  - (b) *standards which are relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)*
  - (c) *some questions that EEC may find useful.*
- *The questions aim at facilitating the understanding of each assessment area and at illustrating the range of topics covered by the standards.*
- *Under each assessment area, it is important to provide information regarding the compliance with the requirements of each sub-area. In particular, the following must be included:*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

- *The EEC should state the compliance for each sub-area (Non-compliant, Partially compliant, Compliant), which must be in agreement with everything stated in the report. It is pointed out that, in the case of standards that cannot be applied due to the status of the HEI and/or of the programme of study, N/A (= Not Applicable) should be noted.*
- *The EEC should state the conclusions and final remarks regarding the programme of study as a whole.*
- *The report may also address other issues which the EEC finds relevant.*

## 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**

### **1.1 Policy for quality assurance**

#### **Standards**

- *Policy for quality assurance of the programme of study:*
  - *has a formal status and is publicly available*
  - *supports the organisation of the quality assurance system through appropriate structures, regulations and processes*
  - *supports teaching, administrative staff and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance*
  - *ensures academic integrity and freedom and is vigilant against academic fraud*
  - *guards against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff*
  - *supports the involvement of external stakeholders*

### **1.2 Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review**

#### **Standards**

- *The programme of study:*
  - *is designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes*
  - *is designed by involving students and other stakeholders*
  - *benefits from external expertise*
  - *reflects the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (preparation for sustainable employment, personal development, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base)*
  - *is designed so that it enables smooth student progression*
  - *is designed so that the exams' and assignments' content corresponds to the level of the programme and the number of ECTS*
  - *defines the expected student workload in ECTS*
  - *includes well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate*
  - *is subject to a formal institutional approval process*

- *results in a qualification that is clearly specified and communicated, and refers to the correct level of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*
- *is regularly monitored in the light of the latest research in the given discipline, thus ensuring that the programme is up-to-date*
- *is periodically reviewed so that it takes into account the changing needs of society, the students' workload, progression and completion, the effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students, student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme*
- *is reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders*

### 1.3 Public information

#### Standards

- *Regarding the programme of study, clear, accurate, up-to date and readily accessible information is published about:*
  - *selection criteria*
  - *intended learning outcomes*
  - *qualification awarded*
  - *teaching, learning and assessment procedures*
  - *pass rates*
  - *learning opportunities available to the students*
  - *graduate employment information*

### 1.4 Information management

#### Standards

- *Information for the effective management of the programme of study is collected, monitored and analysed:*
  - *key performance indicators*
  - *profile of the student population*
  - *student progression, success and drop-out rates*
  - *students' satisfaction with their programmes*
  - *learning resources and student support available*
  - *career paths of graduates*
- *Students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.*



*You may also consider the following questions:*

- *What is the procedure for quality assurance of the programme and who is involved?*
- *Who is involved in the study programme's design and development (launching, changing, internal evaluation) and what is taken into account (strategies, the needs of society, etc.)?*
- *How/to what extent are students themselves involved in the development of the content of their studies?*
- *Please evaluate a) whether the study programme remains current and consistent with developments in society (labour market, digital technologies, etc.), and b) whether the content and objectives of the study programme are in accordance with each other?*
- *Do the content and the delivery of the programme correspond to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)?*
- *How is coherence of the study programme ensured, i.e., logical sequence and coherence of courses? How are substantial overlaps between courses avoided? How is it ensured that the teaching staff is aware of the content and outputs of their colleagues' work within the same study programme?*
- *How does the study programme support development of the learners' general competencies (including digital literacy, foreign language skills, entrepreneurship, communication and teamwork skills)?*
- *What are the scope and objectives of the foundation courses in the study programme (where appropriate)? What are the pass rates?*
- *How long does it take a student on average to graduate? Is the graduation rate for the study programme analogous to other European programmes with similar content? What is the pass rate per course/semester?*
- ***How is it ensured that the actual student workload is in accordance with the workload expressed by ECTS?***
- *What are the opportunities for international students to participate in the study programme (courses/modules taught in a foreign language)?*
- *Is information related to the programme of study publicly available?*
- *How is the HEI evaluating the success of its graduates in the labor market? What is the feedback from graduates of the study programme on their employment and/or continuation of studies?*
- *Have the results of student feedback been analysed and taken into account, and how (e.g., when planning in-service training for the teaching staff)?*
- *What are the reasons for dropping out (voluntary withdrawal)? What has been done to reduce the number of such students?*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

The process and institutional structures for assuring the quality of the program and its delivery are clear and robust. What was less evident was that these processes are informed by detailed and consistent data



on, e.g., student numbers, profiles and trajectories, since the EEC were themselves presented (upon request) with limited data relating to the last 18 months only.

The program benefits from regular department engagement by staff and students with a variety of external stakeholders, which constitutes an informal contribution to program design, content and delivery.

The program satisfactorily reflects the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe.

The program 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 did note that the resources referenced for students in course materials were somewhat out of date and the program content did not always fully reflect the dynamic nature of international relations and politics in the region in question (which have undoubtedly accelerated in recent years).

Notwithstanding the clear and appropriate focus on the international relations of the Eastern Mediterranean region, the program covers a prolonged historical duration (from 6<sup>th</sup> century in Middle East and Early Byzantine period in Europe), possibly at the expense of a clear focus on contemporary international relations. This is especially true of coverage of the Middle East, with the single dedicated module devoting just four teaching sessions to the post-independence period (1950s-).

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.

Some learning outcomes are not appropriate to all students on the programme and should be reconsidered or removed: Independent research (ILO 8) is currently only demonstrated by those students completing the thesis course. The term 'develop their own specific theories' (ILO7) requires clarification so as not to be confused with students being expected to develop grand or meta theories. What the teaching staff emphasize as truly important is instead the development of analytical skills. Finally, managerial skills development (ILO 10) is not evidenced in the program.

This is the first full review of the program since its establishment as a DL in 2017. We were assured that annual student course evaluations are collected and specific problems identified are dealt with through department mechanisms. There was no documentary evidence provided of any periodic reviews of the program as a whole.

There were some issues around the stated selection criteria for students, which differed in the documents provided to us. The program reaccreditation application included 'research potential of the candidate', but this was not included in the program handbook. There was a lack of clarity in discussions with the department on what this meant, how it was evaluated and for which applicants it might be relevant. There was also a confusion between essential criteria required to meet university entry standards and additional criteria which might help the department to select applicants should there be more applicants than places available (admissibility vs. selection).

Information available to students on the qualification awarded, teaching, learning and assessment procedures and learning opportunities was clear and easily accessible. It was, however, not clear to the EEC what the benefits are of not including assessment information in the study guide but in a separate

assessment guide. It seems to make more sense to have one single document with all relevant information on a course.

There is an appropriate career service available to students with information about it distributed widely.

The documentation provided to the EEC in the first instance did not include KPIs, student population profiles, succession or drop-out rates, or student satisfaction data. Some data was provided upon request, but this only covered the previous 18 months and referenced only gender, international/national status and registration/drop out data.

### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

The student counselling support is excellent. This was evident from discussions with both administrative staff and students, as well as being well described in the documents provided to the EEC. 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. For DL students this is invaluable and clearly functions well.

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.

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

There are three recommendations made here which are reflected in our consideration of standard 1.2 as partially compliant.

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 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.

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.

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.

**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	Partially compliant
1.3	Public information	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**

**2.4 Study guides structure, content and interactive activities**

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

#### **Standards**

- *The e-learning methodology is appropriate for the particular programme of study.*
- *Expected teleconferences for presentations, discussion and question-answer sessions, and guidance are set.*
- *A specific plan is developed to safeguard and assess the interaction:*
  - *among students*
  - *between students and teaching staff*
  - *between students and study guides/material of study*
- *Training, guidance and support are provided to the students focusing on interaction and the specificities of e-learning.*
- *The process of teaching and learning supports students' individual and social development.*
- *The process of teaching and learning is flexible, considers different modes of e-learning delivery, where appropriate, uses a variety of pedagogical methods and facilitates the achievement of planned learning outcomes.*
- *Students are encouraged to take an active role in creating the e-learning process.*
- *The implementation of student-centered learning and teaching encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher.*
- *Teaching methods, tools and material used in teaching are modern, effective, support the use of modern educational technologies and are regularly updated.*
- *Mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship is promoted.*
- *The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths.*
- *Appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints regarding the process of teaching and learning are set.*

### **2.2 Practical training**

#### **Standards**

- *Practical and theoretical studies are interconnected.*
- *The organisation and the content of practical training, if applicable, support achievement of planned learning outcomes and meet the needs of the stakeholders.*

## 2.3 Student assessment

### Standards

- *A complete assessment framework is designed, focusing on e-learning methodology, including clearly defined evaluation criteria for student assignments and the final examination.*
- *Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures.*
- *Assessment is appropriate, transparent, objective and supports the development of the learner.*
- *The criteria for the method of assessment, as well as criteria for marking, are published in advance.*
- *Assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the e-learning process.*
- *Assessment, where possible, is carried out by more than one examiner.*
- *A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.*
- *Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field.*
- *The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances.*

## 2.4 Study guides structure, content and interactive activities

### Standards

- *A study guide for each course, fully aligned with e-learning philosophy and methodology and the need for student interaction with the material is developed. The study guide should include, for each course week / module, the following:*
  - *Clearly defined objectives and expected learning outcomes of the programme, of the modules and activities in an organised and coherent manner*
  - *Presentation of course material, and students' activities on a weekly basis, in a variety of ways and means (e.g. printed material, electronic material, teleconferencing, multimedia)*
  - ***Weekly schedule of interactive activities and exercises (i.e. simulations, problem solving, scenarios, argumentation)***
  - *Clear instructions for creating posts, discussion, and feedback*
  - *Self-assessment exercises and self-correction guide*
  - *Bibliographic references and suggestions for further study*
  - *Number of assignments/papers and their topics, along with instructions and additional study material*
  - *Synopsis*
- *Study guides, material and activities are appropriate for the level of the programme according to the EQF.*



*You may also consider the following questions:*

- Is the nature of the programme compatible with e-learning delivery?*
- How do the programme, the material, the facilities, and the guidelines safeguard the interaction between students, students and teaching staff, students and the material?*
- How many students upload their work and discuss it in the platform during the semester?*
- How is it monitored that the teaching staff base their teaching and assessment methods on objectives and intended learning outcomes? Provide samples of examination papers (if available).*
- How are students' different abilities, learning needs and learning opportunities taken into consideration when conducting educational activities?*
- How is the development of students' general competencies (including digital skills) supported in educational activities?*
- How is it ensured that innovative teaching methods, learning environments and learning aids that support learning are diverse and used in educational activities?*
- Is the teaching staff using new technology in order to make the teaching process more effective?*
- How is it ensured that theory and practice are interconnected in teaching and learning?*
- How is practical training organised (finding practical training positions, guidelines for practical training, supervision, reporting, feedback, etc.)? What role does practical training have in achieving the objectives of the study programme? What is student feedback on the content and arrangement of practical training?*
- Are students actively involved in research? How is student involvement in research set up?***
- How is supervision of student research papers (seminar papers, projects, theses, etc.) organised?*
- Do students' assessments correspond to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)?***
- How are the assessment methods chosen and to what extent do students get supportive feedback on their academic progress during their studies?*
- How is the objectivity and relevance of student assessment ensured (assessment of the degree of achievement of the intended learning outcomes)?*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

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.

The university employs a Moodle installation to support online teaching, learning, and administrative processes. The platform is equipped with synchronous and asynchronous tools that facilitate effective communication between students and lecturers, as well as among students themselves. E-assessment procedures are also available, ranging from quizzes with automatic feedback to more complex assessments that evaluate critical thinking and teamwork (even though it became clear during the site visit that group work is not actually used in the program). Students benefit from a minimum of 9 hours of synchronous communication with their lecturers per course and report high levels of satisfaction with these

sessions. Those sessions are, however, not mandatory. The panel was told that they usually draw about 50% attendance. They are recorded for those students who do not attend, which is very much appreciated by the students. They mostly take place between 18:00 and 21:00, to allow as many people as possible to attend.

Collaboration among teachers and students (and among students) is conducted through the online forums of the course and other forums that can be created ad-hoc for facing special needs. In addition, the EEC was informed that collaboration among students was promoted by collaborative activities, though there were no details on the design, procedure and technical support for these activities. Students reported not to participate in working groups, such as project groups. The EEC advises more clarity on this point: Is there group work in the courses or not?

Formative assessment of the courses is based on one or two submitted essays and reports with provision of personalised feedback during the course counting up to 20-30% of the final grade, while summative assessment is based on a mandatory final exam (online) covering 60% of the final grade. The final exam usually consists of two analytical essays about different topics in the course. The assessment procedure during the course is completed with a number of weekly online quiz-based assignments and formative exercises included in the study guides in order to self-evaluate student knowledge and skills of the course. These weekly activities along with the participation in in-class discussions count for a minimum of 10% of the final grade. Their point is to ensure continuous involvement of students in the course. Lecturers thus have the flexibility to set appropriate assessment methods for 40% of the final grade, about which the students are duly informed at the start of the course through an assessment guide and during the teleconferences. All other assignments need to have been graded with feedback before the final exam. Students have flexibility in the choice of topics for their formative assignments.

Academic honesty is enforced through the use of Proctorio during final exams and Turnitin for written assignments. The rapid development of AI (ChatGPT) is recognized as a threat, especially for the formative written assignments. The program staff are aware and working on ways to respond.

If a student wishes to complain about a grade, s/he must first discuss the issue with the instructor herself/himself. If the issue cannot be resolved, a re-grading committee can be appointed.

### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

The EEC believes that continually evaluating the quality assurance of distance learning by non-mandatory external accreditation organisations is a good practice.

The EEC considers the university's distance learning model to be 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 recognises the many benefits of collaboration among students promoted by collaborative activities and in-class discussions.

Finally, 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 urges the university to keep up these strong elements of their distance learning model while reinforcing them when possible.



### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

The students the EEC spoke to explained that some course instructors provide a 20-minute video every week on the topic and material of the week. They find this helpful and would like to see this happen every week and in every course.

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.

While the EEC emphasises the benefits of any form of interaction and collaboration, online synchronous teleconferences and teamwork may pose challenges as the program expands internationally with students across different time zones. Therefore, the EEC recommends that the university explore ways to support such collaboration from a coordination perspective and suggests perhaps increasing asynchronous online interaction and collaboration to better accommodate the diverse needs of the students. The EEC encourages the university to continue evaluating and adapting their distance learning model to ensure the highest level of quality and effectiveness.

**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	Compliant
2.4	Study guides structure, content and interactive activities	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**

### **3.1 Teaching staff recruitment and development**

#### **Standards**

- *Institutions ensure the competence of their teaching staff.*
- *Fair, transparent and clear processes for the recruitment and development of the teaching staff are set up.*
- *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 regularly engaged in professional and teaching-skills training and development.*
- *Training, guidance and support are provided to the teaching staff focusing on interaction and the specificities of e-learning.*
- *Promotion of the teaching staff takes into account the quality of their teaching, their research activity, the development of their teaching skills and their mobility.*
- *Innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies is encouraged.*
- *Conditions of employment that recognise the importance of teaching are followed.*
- *Recognised visiting teaching staff participates in teaching the study programme.*

### **3.2 Teaching staff number and status**

#### **Standards**

- *The number of the teaching staff is adequate to support the programme of study.*
- *The teaching staff status (rank, full/part time) is appropriate to offer a quality programme of study.*
- *Visiting staff number does not exceed the number of the permanent staff.*

### **3.3 Synergies of teaching and research**

#### **Standards**

- *The teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the HEI and with partners outside (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other HEIs in Cyprus or abroad).*
- *Scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research is encouraged.*
- *The teaching staff publications are within the discipline.*

- *Teaching staff studies and publications are closely related to the programme's courses.*
- *The allocation of teaching hours compared to the time for research activity is appropriate.*

*You may also consider the following questions:*

- *Is the teaching staff qualified to teach in the e-learning programme of study?*
- *How are the members of the teaching staff supported with regard to the development of their teaching skills? How is feedback given to members of the teaching staff regarding their teaching results and teaching skills?*
- *How is the teaching performance assessed? How does their teaching performance affect their remuneration, evaluation and/or selection?*
- *Is teaching connected with research?*
- *Does the HEI involve visiting teaching staff from other HEIs in Cyprus and abroad?*
- *What is the number, workload, qualifications and status of the teaching staff (rank, full/part timers)?*
- *Is student evaluation conducted on the teaching staff? If yes, have the results of student feedback been analysed and taken into account, and how (e.g., when planning in-service training for the teaching staff)?*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

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.

The teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the HEI and with partners outside (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other HEIs in Cyprus or abroad). 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 program in its self-assessment states that students are often involved in research, so that there is direct interaction between students, teachers, and research findings. The EEC would like to stress that this is very important. Given that "students should be viewed as actors in the production of research and not merely as recipients" (quotation from the self-assessment), they should also have the opportunity to present and discuss their research interactively in the course and with the other students.

Recognized visiting teaching staff participates in teaching the study program.

According to oral information, which could not be verified with data, student evaluations are collected for every course, and the response rate is usually around 50%.

The university has a distance learning unit called "e-Learning Pedagogical Support Unit" (ePSU) dedicated to providing technical training and support to faculty members to enhance their skills in delivering effective online teaching. The training programs offered by ePSU are well-structured and comprehensive, allowing faculty members to gain certification in professional development relevant to distance learning.

### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

Consistent training, guidance and support are provided to the teaching staff regarding the specificities of e-learning. In this way, innovation in the use of new technologies is also encouraged. The EEC believes that the ePSU unit and the investment in faculty development reflect the university's commitment to delivering quality online education and ensuring that faculty members are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to support student success.

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.

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. A student said: "Whenever there is a problem, there is a response." Lecturers received praise for being flexible and available in supporting the students. Program coordinator Dr. Kontos received special praise for being a good thesis supervisor, very organized, knowledgeable and supportive. The program makes an effort to encourage teaching staff to be present and accessible to students, to respond within 48 hours to communication from students (the EEC was told they usually respond within 24 hours), and to hold regular online office hours.

The content of the program was found inspiring, also due to interesting guest speakers, sometimes from the policy world. A suggestion was made that more speakers from the policy world should be included. The students and alumni the EEC spoke to were very positive about the scholarly quality and the commitment of the teaching staff. An international student remarked upon the high academic quality of the Cypriot academics. The program was found challenging and serious.

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

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.

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 of their scholarly status and success.

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.

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.

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

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

##### 4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria

###### Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student admission are in place.*
- *Access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.*

##### 4.2 Student progression

###### Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student progression are in place.*
- *Processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression, are in place.*

##### 4.3 Student recognition

###### Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student recognition are in place.*
- *Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility.*
- *Appropriate recognition procedures are in place that rely on:*
  - *institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention*
  - *cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country*

##### 4.4 Student certification

###### Standards

- *Pre-defined and published regulations regarding student certification are in place.*



- *Students receive certification explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.*

*You may also consider the following questions:*

- *Are the admission requirements for the study programme appropriate? How is the students' prior preparation/education assessed (including the level of international students, for example)?*
- *How is the procedure of recognition for prior learning and work experience ensured, including recognition of study results acquired at foreign higher education institutions?*
- *Is the certification of the HEI accompanied by a diploma supplement, which is in line with European and international standards?*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

#### **4.1 Student admission, processes and criteria**

The EEC notes that regulations regarding student admission are generally in place and in line with the national and international standards. There are appropriate and reasonable minimum entrance criteria regarding the student selection. Students must hold a Bachelor's degree in social sciences, or another relevant Bachelor's degree. Additionally, students must fulfil the English language requirements, by holding a degree that was taught in English or having a TOEFL score of 213 and above, GCSE "O" Level with minimum "C" or IELTS with a score of an average 6. This is rather low, and staff indicate that occasionally there are problems with students' level of English. Moreover, two recommendation letters, preferably from professors are required, a CV and a personal statement by the prospective student expressing his/her interest in following the program. Based mostly on the academic performance and the CV of the candidate, the central Admission Committee makes the decision to either accept or reject the application, and then the Department confirms these decisions.

#### **4.2 Student progression**

The regulations regarding student progression are clear. There are both formative and summative assessments in each course, and the students are encouraged to self-assess their own progress and the quality of teaching, by completing surveys. Delays in student progress are addressed on a case by case basis, which is possible and recommendable in such a small program.

The university's Moodle platform provides a wide range of learning analytics tools for monitoring student progression and performance based on collecting information from the student with lower grades, poor participation, or with undelivered activities. This information is useful to identify students at risk, so that the lecturers can intervene with corrective measures. However, the positive impact in terms of improvement of student success from the specific corrective measures were not shown during the meetings.

The EEC would like to highlight that students benefit from a good student-teacher ratio (1:30), and student feedback is very positive.



The panel found out only during the site visit that it is possible to complete the program in twelve months. This applies to students who complete all courses successfully in their first (Fall) and second (Spring) semester and then successfully write a thesis in the summer.

#### 4.3 Student recognition

Regulations regarding student recognition are in place. The recognition procedures are fair and compliant, in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

#### 4.4 Student certification

Students will receive an MA in International Relations and Eastern Mediterranean Studies, issued by the Higher Education Institution, which is recognized by the Republic of Cyprus. The certification is in line with the European and international standards. However, its recognition in countries like Greece can be challenging.

#### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

It is very 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.

There are significant efforts by the teaching personnel to stimulate and encourage the interaction among students.

It is very important that students are encouraged to self-assess their own progress and that they assess the teaching by completing surveys.

Dropout rates are quite low. The data provided by the university showed 0% dropout in this program since Fall 2021. The EEC believes that this is because the students registered over the last three semesters have not yet finished the program. According to the interviews held during the site visit with teaching staff and students, students' circumstances are taken into account to facilitate their follow-up of the study program. 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 on-going 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. However, evidence of the effectiveness of this information, in terms of specific measures for improvement and actions taken by the program, was not provided during the meeting.

#### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

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.

The EEC considers important that a minimum grade should be required for the admission of a candidate.

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 EEC encourages raising the English language requirements to a higher level than the one requested.

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.

**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	Compliant
4.2	Student progression	Compliant
4.3	Student recognition	Compliant
4.4	Student certification	Compliant

## 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**

### 5.1 Teaching and Learning resources

#### Standards

- *Weekly interactive activities per each course are set.*
- *The e-learning material and activities take advantage of the capabilities offered by the virtual and audio-visual environment and the following are applied:*
  - *Simulations in virtual environments*
  - *Problem solving scenarios*
  - *Interactive learning and formative assessment games*
  - *Interactive weekly activities with image, sound and unlimited possibilities for reality reconstruction and further processing based on hypotheses*
  - *They have the ability to transfer students to real-life situations, make decisions, and study the consequences of their decisions*
  - *They help in building skills both in experiences and attitudes like in real life and also in experiencing - not just memorizing knowledge*
- *A pedagogical planning unit for e-learning, which is responsible for the support of the e-learning unit and addresses the requirements for study materials, interactive activities and formative assessment in accordance to international standards, is established.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*
- *All resources are fit for purpose.*
- *Student-centred learning and flexible modes of e-learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources.*

### 5.2 Physical resources

#### Standards

- *Physical resources, i.e. premises, libraries, study facilities, IT infrastructure, are adequate to support the study programme.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*

- *All resources are fit for purpose and students are informed about the services available to them.*

### 5.3 Human support resources

#### Standards

- *Human support resources, i.e. tutors/mentors, counsellors, other advisers, qualified administrative staff, are adequate to support the study programme.*
- *Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).*
- *All resources are fit for purpose and students are informed about the services available to them.*

### 5.4 Student support

#### Standards

- *Student support is provided covering the needs of a diverse student population, such as mature, part-time, employed and international students and students with special needs.*
- *Students are informed about the services available to them.*
- *Student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing student support.*
- *Students' mobility within and across higher education systems is encouraged and supported.*

*You may also consider the following questions:*

- *Evaluate the supply of teaching materials and equipment (including teaching labs, expendable materials, etc.), the condition of classrooms, adequacy of financial resources to conduct the study programme and achieve its objectives. What needs to be supplemented/ improved?*
- *What is the feedback from the teaching staff on the availability of teaching materials, classrooms, etc.?*
- *Are the resources in accordance with actual (changing) needs and contemporary requirements? How is the effectiveness of using resources ensured?*
- *What are the resource-related trends and future risks (risks arising from changing numbers of students, obsolescence of teaching equipment, etc.)? How are these trends taken into account and how are the risks mitigated?*
- *Evaluate student feedback on support services. Based on student feedback, which support services (including information flow, counselling) need further development?*
- *How is student learning within the standard period of study supported (student counselling, flexibility of the study programme, etc.)?*

- *How students' special needs are considered (different capabilities, different levels of academic preparation, special needs due to physical disabilities, etc.)?*
- *How is student mobility being supported?*

### Findings

*A short description of the situation in the Higher Education Institution (HEI), based on elements from the application for external evaluation and on findings from the onsite visit.*

#### **5.1 Teaching and Learning resources**

The EEC was satisfied with the overall support that is available to students and staff. 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. However, the EEC notes that some required readings consist of entire volumes and that assessments are not always clearly detailed, sometimes referring students to the LMS or a separate assessment guide instead. There is room for improvement here.

The distance learning unit (ePSU) is responsible for providing pedagogical support to faculty members in designing, creating, implementing, and evaluating online courses. The Unit ensures that study materials, interactive activities, and formative and summative assessments meet international standards. To guarantee the quality and consistency across the university's distance learning courses, the Unit also provides a comprehensive Faculty Handbook with clear and detailed guidelines for course development and delivery.

#### **5.2 Physical resources**

There is a pleasant academic environment in terms of the internal and external space. The EEC visited the UNIC library and study facilities and saw some classrooms and the cafeteria. There was accessibility provision across the buildings.

#### **5.3 Human support resources**

The EEC was informed that the UNIC provides support to students and staff with personalized counselling services for distance learning students.

#### **5.4 Student support**

Each student is allocated an advisor as a mentor responsible to support students with their studies; during the first year, students must attend at least three meetings with their mentors.

### Strengths

*A list of strengths, e.g. examples of good practices, achievements, innovative solutions etc.*

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.

### Areas of improvement and recommendations

*A list of problem areas to be dealt with, followed by or linked to the recommendations of how to improve the situation.*

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.

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 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 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.

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 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.

**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	Partially compliant
5.2	Physical resources	Compliant
5.3	Human support resources	Compliant
5.4	Student support	Compliant

## D. Conclusions and final remarks

*Please provide constructive conclusions and final remarks which may form the basis upon which improvements of the quality of the programme of study under review may be achieved, with emphasis on the correspondence with the EQF.*

The previous sections of this report contain the observations, identified best practices, and recommendations by the EEC. The EEC trusts that the program, department, school, and university will employ the indications of partial compliance with the quality criteria, where they have been in order, to further improve what is already a well-functioning program. The EEC hopes that also the many additional suggestions made on the previous pages can be a source of inspiration in the program in the coming years.

The EEC would like to thank all its interlocutors at the site visit as well as all persons involved in the preparation and organization of this assessment. We felt welcome at the University of Nicosia, and we felt a spirit of open exchange that allowed us to develop an informed impression of the program. We encountered a committed and collegial teaching staff and program coordinator and an attentive management at School and University levels. We spoke to students and alumni whose enthusiasm was palpable, even as they were physically remote. It remains for us to wish the program, its students, and its staff continuing success.





## E. Signatures of the EEC

<i>Name</i>	<i>Signature</i>
Prof. Annette Freyberg-Inan	
Prof. Emma Murphy	
Prof. Vivi Kefala	
Prof. Santi Caballe Llobet	
Ms. Anna Tzamantaki	
Click to enter Name	

**Date:** 13 May 2023