



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

HELLENIC REPUBLIC

Α.ΔΙ.Π.

Η.Ο.Α.

ΑΡΧΗ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ & ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ
ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΝΩΤΑΤΗ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ

HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE
AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

DEPARTMENT OF BALKAN, SLAVIC AND ORIENTAL STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF MACEDONIA



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MINISTRY OF EDUCATION & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, CULTURE & SPORTS
MANAGING AUTHORITY



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The External Evaluation Committee

Introduction

I. The External Evaluation Procedure

- Brief account of documents examined, of the Site Visit, meetings and facilities visited.

II. The Internal Evaluation Procedure

- Comments on the quality and completeness of the documentation provided and on the overall acceptance of and participation in the Quality Assurance procedures by the Department .

A. Curriculum

APPROACH

- Goals and objectives of the Curriculum, structure and content, intended learning outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION

- Rationality, functionality, effectiveness of the Curriculum.

RESULTS

- Maximizing success and dealing with potential inhibiting factors.

IMPROVEMENT

- Planned improvements.

B. Teaching

APPROACH:

- Pedagogic policy and methodology, means and resources.

IMPLEMENTATION

- Quality and evaluation of teaching procedures, teaching materials and resources, mobility.

RESULTS

- Efficacy of teaching, understanding of positive or negative results.

IMPROVEMENT

- Proposed methods for improvement.

C. Research

APPROACH

- Research policy and main objectives.

IMPLEMENTATION

- Research promotion and assessment, quality of support and infrastructure.

RESULTS

- Research projects and collaborations, scientific publications and applied results.

IMPROVEMENT

- Proposed initiatives aiming at improvement.

D. All Other Services

APPROACH

- Quality and effectiveness of services provided by the Department.

IMPLEMENTATION

- Organization and infrastructure of the Department's administration (e.g. secretariat of the Department).

RESULTS

- Adequateness and functionality of administrative and other services.

IMPROVEMENTS

- Proposed initiatives aiming at improvement.

Collaboration with social, cultural and production organizations***E. Strategic Planning, Perspectives for Improvement and Dealing with Potential Inhibiting Factors***

- Short-, medium- and long-term goals and plans of action proposed by the Department.

F. Final Conclusions and recommendations of the EEC on:

- The development and present situation of the Department, good practices and weaknesses identified through the External Evaluation process, recommendations for improvement.

External Evaluation Committee

The Committee responsible for the External Evaluation of the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies of the University of Macedonia consisted of the following five (5) expert evaluators drawn from the Registry constituted by the HQA in accordance with Law 3374/2005:

1. ***Dr Nikolaos Voukelatos***, University of Kent, UK (Coordinator)
2. ***Professor Marina Papanastassiou***, Middlesex University, UK
3. ***Professor Lora Gerd***, St. Petersburg Institute of History, Russia
4. ***Dr Tassos Anastassiadis***, McGill University, Canada
5. ***Dr Antonis Ellinas***, University of Cyprus, Cyprus

Introduction

***** NOTICE *****

The Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies (the *Department*) of the School of Economic and Regional Studies (the *School*) of the University of Macedonia (the *University*) emerged from the merger of the Department of Balkan Studies of the University of Western Macedonia (based in Florina) and the initial Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies of the University of Macedonia (based in Thessaloniki). The merger took place in June 2013, in accordance with the Presidential Decree 88/05-06-2013. The External Evaluation Report (EER) refers explicitly to the *new integrated* Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies at the University of Macedonia based in Thessaloniki, as this was established by the above mentioned Presidential Decree in June 2013.

I. THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION PROCEDURE

The report relies on written documentation as this was provided by the Department, before and during the site visit. The report is also informed by input derived from the site visit through meetings and formal interactions with the University of Macedonia, the School of Economic and Regional Studies and the Department's leadership, Department Faculty, and Department and University Staff.

More specifically, the External Evaluation Committee (EEC) received the Department's Internal Evaluation Report (IER), dated 18/12/2013, in advance of the site visit. Following a brief orientation session at the Hellenic Quality Assurance & Accreditation Agency (HQA) headquarters in Athens on Monday 3/2/2014, the EEC visited the Department in Thessaloniki on Tuesday and Wednesday 4-5/2/2014.

In the morning of the first day of the site visit (Tuesday 4/2/2014), the EEC had a brief introductory meeting with the University's Rector (Professor Yannis Hajidimitriou), the University's Deputy Rector (Professor Evgenia Alexandropoulou, also Director of the University's Quality Assurance Unit), the University's Vice Rector (Professor Harry Papapanagos), the School's Provost (Professor Konstantinos Velentzas), and the Department's Head (Professor Dimitrios Kyrkilis).

After this introductory meeting, the EEC proceeded to meet with the Department's faculty. This meeting was attended by the vast majority of the new integrated Department's faculty, as well as by a number of administrative staff and Special and Lab Teaching Staff (EEDIP) representatives. In addition to the pre-planned schedule of presentations by the Department, both parties agreed to a free-format discussion during the first day of the site visit. All members of faculty were invited to participate in the discussion.

In particular, the schedule for the first day involved presentations and discussions on the following main topics (presenters in parentheses):

- Brief introduction to the Department (Professor Dimitrios Kyrkilis)
- Undergraduate programme (Dr Sofia Delipalla)
- Postgraduate programme (Dr Christos Paraskevopoulos)

- Research (Dr Christos Karpetis)
- Undergraduate placement programme (Professor Harry Papapanagos)
- ERASMUS programme (Dr Christos Karpetis)
- Community engagement and externalization (Dr Nikolaos Marantzidis)
- Internal Evaluation Report and main conclusions (Professor Dimitrios Kyrkilis)

During the second day of the site visit (Wednesday 5/2/2014), the EEC had meetings with non-faculty members of staff and students, and also had the opportunity to visit the facilities of the Department and the University. More specifically, the second day of the site visit began with an extensive discussion with the administrative staff of the Undergraduate and the Postgraduate Offices. This was followed by a meeting with the Department's Special and Lab Teaching Staff (EEDIP) and the staff running the IT labs. Then, the EEC met with student representatives from the Department's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Afterwards, the EEC was guided through various facilities, including the Library, IT labs, teaching rooms and sports facilities. In addition to examining the infrastructure available, the EEC had the opportunity to discuss with the Public Services Department Officer (Konstantinos Zontanos) tasked with overseeing the Library, and the Director of the Centre for IT and Networks (Aspasia Tsakiridou). After lunch, the Department's faculty kindly agreed to have an additional meeting with the EEC to further elaborate on their strategic plans. Finally, the second day of site visit was concluded with a brief exit meeting with the University's Rector, the University's Deputy Rector, the School's Provost and the Department's Head, where the EEC thanked them for their hospitality and assistance, and outlined the main impressions from the visit.

II. THE INTERNAL EVALUATION PROCEDURE

The Internal Evaluation Report (IER) was produced by the Department following the requirements set out by the HQA. The IER was well-written, informative and assisted the EEC in their external evaluation. The information contained in the IER was supplemented by discussions with Departmental and University staff, and by additional material prepared by the Department in advance as well as upon request by the EEC during the site visit. The EEC appreciates the Department's efforts in collecting and providing this material. The EEC concludes that the Department has met the objectives of the Internal Evaluation Process.

A1. Curriculum – Undergraduate Programme

APPROACH

The undergraduate programme is currently facing a very complex situation due to the aforementioned merger and it is situated at a crossroads. Since the merger occurred, the Department is compelled to run simultaneously 3 different undergraduate programmes:

- The undergraduate programme of the former Department in Thessaloniki, which saw its last cohort enter in September 2012. This programme will run for another n+1 years (n being the number of years normally required for the completion of the degree and n+2 being the number of years legally allowed for completion).
- The undergraduate programme of the former Department of Balkan Studies in Florina (for which an IER was not available). This programme saw its last cohort enter in 09/2012, and it will also run for another n+1 years.
- A transitory undergraduate programme which is currently implemented for the cohort of students enrolled in 09/2013 in the new integrated Department. Only the first year of this programme has been defined.

This has been a considerable difficulty imposed upon the Department, which had to accommodate new staff, the Florina students and, at the same time, had to enrol far more students than before (200+ in 09/2013 compared to 90+ in 09/2012) while running three programmes. These are concrete difficulties and the Department should be commended for trying to cope with them.

In light of these developments, it appears that the design of a new undergraduate curriculum does not only constitute an urgency (in order to avoid having to create new temporary procedures next September), but it can also be considered as an opportunity to address issues independent of the merger, which are more general and also not untypical of the situation in many Greek Universities. The “new” integrated Department is now unique in Greece by its area focus, and it has the potential to become a flagship in the general area in the field of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental studies.

As is typical in the Greek higher education system, the goals and objectives of the undergraduate programme have been set out by the State (“FEK of creation” of 1996):

- To cultivate and promote knowledge regarding the language, history and cultures of Balkan, Slavic and “Oriental”/“Eastern” states, and to study and promote the economic, social and political relations of these states with Greece.
- To provide students with the necessary skills in order to embark on a fruitful academic and professional career.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Department has attempted to achieve the previously mentioned objectives by creating a curriculum focusing on two directions, namely “Economics and International Business” and “Politics and International Relations”, carrying a multidisciplinary aspect including history, social sciences, political science and cultural studies. This effort has also been complemented by promoting the study of the languages of its target area.

The layout of the former Thessaloniki Department’s undergraduate curriculum consisted of 6 courses per semester over 8 semesters, for a total of 48 courses and 240 ECTS units (5 ECTS

units/course). This was a 2-stage curriculum (core/specialization). During the first stage (Core), students were introduced to a multitude of scientific approaches and topics (20 mandatory courses and 8 “mandatory electives”). During the second stage (Specialization), students had a wide variety of modules from which to choose (20 “mandatory electives” and 52 electives).

Moreover, in the former undergraduate programme students were asked to choose one main language (between Russian and Turkish) during the first stage, and they also had the opportunity to opt for a second language (from a variety of mostly Slavic languages) during the second stage. Within the new transitory programme, the Department has opted for making more languages available to students from the beginning. Students can now opt for any one of the following five languages upon their admission in the programme: Bulgarian, Serb, Rumanian, Russian and Turkish. The Department should also be commended for its efforts to seek outside funding from local community actors in order to provide courses in other languages relevant to its scope (Hebrew and Armenian).

The Department has recently introduced a placement programme (“practical exercise”). The placements are not formally part of the curriculum, but they illustrate an interesting interaction between the Department and practitioners, as well as other social stakeholders, in prospective areas of employment and specialization.

With respect to the implementation of the curriculum, the Department has the necessary academic staff in all areas, with the exception of languages. The Department did point out that the regulatory framework makes it particularly difficult to recruit certain categories of language staff (e.g. it was highlighted that it had been impossible over the last 10 years to recruit a teacher in the Turkish language). Moreover, it should be noted that most of the language staff does not belong to the research academic personnel category (DEP), for which a PhD is required, but to the Special and Lab Teaching Staff (EEDIP) for which a PhD is not required. This may be an issue given the high number of language electives included in the curriculum. The Department compensates for these issues by hiring adjunct lecturers (known as “407” in the Greek higher education system). However, during the last years the downward trend in terms of state funding for this purpose has limited the number of possible recruitments of adjuncts.

Another challenge with regards to languages stems from their unequal popularity. The EEC was informed that, when the Department polled the September 2013 cohort of students on their language preferences, 142 out of the 207 students opted for Russian as their first choice (followed by Turkish). Given that the Department had introduced a cap of 100 students in Russian, students had to be directed towards other languages.

Another problem mentioned by the Department in terms of the implementation of the curriculum was the lack of space (and especially of large classrooms). The EEC indeed observed in the Undergraduate Office’s timetabling platform that most of the classrooms were scheduled in full occupation during both terms (from 9 in the morning to 9 in the evening on most days).

RESULTS

Students seem, in general, to be satisfied with their academic experience. The former Thessaloniki Department had a very high profile (1 out of 6 first-year students enrolled had selected it as their first choice). Within the context of the annual survey, students expressed

their satisfaction with the content of the curriculum, also mentioning that “academic staff have a diversity of knowledge and are approachable”. The lack of resources in language courses was also brought forward. Students considered placements and the language courses as essential in terms of their professional integration. However, the EEC noticed that student response rates varied significantly among courses, and that there did not seem to be any specific departmental process in place to evaluate this feedback.

Student attendance remains one of the key challenges. The IER and the faculty pointed out that student attendance tends to be low, especially after the first year. Consequently, there may be courses being taught with a very low number of students. Currently, an elective course will not be given only if fewer than 5 students enroll. However, since students from previous years who have not passed a course can enroll in it as many times as they wish, this means that almost all courses are guaranteed to reach the minimum threshold.

It is remarkable that students are exposed to a very high number of teaching hours (4hrs per course x 6 courses = 24hrs/week). The fact that more than 90% of the courses are lecture-only results in particularly heavy weeks. This is unusual by international standards and, during the site visit, both faculty and students saw this particularly heavy load of teaching hours as an inhibiting factor for student attendance.

IMPROVEMENT

The Department is aware of the above issues. It can bolster a certain number of very positive results. It has instituted a Curriculum Committee, which reflects on the needs of the curriculum and makes annual suggestions to the Department. This is a positive step.

The EEC supports the Department’s effort to engage in the process of designing a new curriculum and aiming at completing this process before the end of the year, in order to avoid having to implement temporary expedients next year. The EEC would like to note that the curriculum design, especially with regards to the electives, should be motivated by the issues in question (improving student attendance, enhancing the student classroom experience, optimizing human resources and space allocation). Thus, the list of electives should not be a simple juxtaposition of the courses offered by the previous two Departments in the name of “FEK fetishism”.

The EEC further proposes the following:

Recommendation A.1.1

Some of the new integrated Department’s academics belong in the area of Anthropology and Social Sciences. The EEC suggests that this specialization should be further explored, namely by incorporating it as a third direction in the new undergraduate curriculum. This would also rationalize the abundance of electives, some of which could become core courses for the third direction.

Recommendation A.1.2

The overloaded undergraduate curriculum could be lightened by reconsidering the weight of each course. For example, instead of distributing the 240 ECTS units required for the acquisition of a degree (which is the only regulatory obligation imposed) in 48 courses of 5 ECTS units each, the Department could choose to distribute them in the new Curriculum over 40 6-ECTS unit courses (this is perfectly allowed by the ECTS system). The students’ load would, therefore, decrease by one course (4 hours/week) per semester. In the process,

the assessment method could be reviewed for each course, allowing for more personal work and for a more continuous evaluation. This would also liberate space and staff resources.

Recommendation A.1.3

The Department should better monitor actual attendance in the electives and modulate their offer. Not all electives have to be offered every year. The Department could implement a variety of reforms, for example imposing prerequisites and increasing the minimum number of students (e.g. 15) below which an elective is not offered (excluding languages). Moreover, the Department could adopt the number of “non-stagnating” students (up to n+1 years) as a more reliable indicator. For example, if a course has had fewer than 15 non-stagnating students enrolled two years in a row, then maybe it should be offered on a biennial basis. This could free up staff resources to be used in breaking the introductory mandatory courses in two or more groups, thus allowing for a more interactive classroom experience with the students.

Recommendation A.1.4

The Department should reconsider the method of teaching, especially for large classes. Instead of a 2 x 2hrs lecture timetable per week (4hrs lectures should be avoided anyway), these courses could also incorporate small-group seminars in lieu of lecture hours (e.g. 2 x 1hr lectures, each followed by a 1hr half-group seminar). Staff teaching load would remain the same at 4hrs, but student’s weekly workload would reduce to 3hrs per course.

Recommendation A.1.5

The EEC supports the Department’s effort of internationalization through the implementation of ERASMUS agreements and specific courses in English. In order to increase the attendance of these courses, the Department can consider putting the incoming students in contact with Greek students, and also prepare its own students for the ERASMUS programme. The EEC suggests that the Curriculum includes one ERASMUS course in English among the mandatory electives for all students.

Recommendation A.1.6

The EEC supports the students’ request to integrate the placements into the curriculum and to consolidate the role of the faculty placement advisor. Given the Department’s mandate, international and domestic placements should constitute an essential element of the curriculum.

A2. Curriculum – Postgraduate Programme

APPROACH

The Department currently runs a fee-based self-financed Masters in Politics and Economics of Contemporary Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, delivered entirely in English.

The programme’s goals are

- To promote knowledge and research in the sectors of politics and economics of the target area of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.
- To provide further research-focused specialized training for the graduates of both its own undergraduate programme and of other Universities.
- To provide specialized training regarding its target area for executives of the private and public sector (businesses, government, NGOs, IGOs).

The goals and their implementation via the curriculum are decided on a regular (biennial) basis through an appropriate procedure decided by the Department, taking into account the student evaluation process. The Department is constrained by the legal and bureaucratic framework in altering the postgraduate curriculum. The EEC feels that the existing legislation impedes the Department's ability to take charge of its procedures and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students and scientific expectations.

IMPLEMENTATION

The postgraduate programme has a rational and coherent structure. In addition to assessment through final exams, the programme has a significant coursework element. The Department has the necessary human resources to provide the teaching and support of this programme. The EEC was particularly impressed by the commitment and professionalism of the Postgraduate Office.

During the site visit, the EEC was informed of the existence of a considerable cohort of students enrolled in the postgraduate programme administered since 2009 through the former Department of Balkan Studies in Florina, titled "Studies in Languages and Civilization of South-Eastern European countries". The EEC did not have the opportunity to evaluate this programme. However, action should be taken to ensure the successful integration of these students and the completion of their degree.

RESULTS

The postgraduate programme is clearly a flagship for the Department. It attracts a high number of applications (52 in 2012-2013, of which 37 were admitted). The programme attracts a considerable amount of foreign applicants (a third of the last cohort), which is a positive sign in terms of reputation and internationalization. Only 5% of the applicants come from the Department's own undergraduate programme.

The graduation rate for the last cohort was quite reasonable at 81%. During the site visit, the EEC had the chance to meet and conduct interviews, in English, with 4 postgraduate students and recent alumni. The students were satisfied with the curriculum and with the faculty's availability and support.

IMPROVEMENT

The Department is aware of the need to constantly improve its postgraduate programme in order to strengthen its international profile. The Department is, of course, concerned with the issue of space and the programme's costs, examining whether it should increase the number of students and/or the fees. The EEC believes that the Department should not necessarily increase the number of students, given the already high admission rate.

The EEC proposes the following:

Recommendation A.2.1

The EEC supports the Department's efforts to further internationalize its postgraduate programme. Given the Department's unique focus, the EEC suggests for a language course to be formally introduced into the curriculum.

Recommendation A.2.2

The Department should consider introducing a course on research and writing skills. Given the students' diverse backgrounds (both geographical and disciplinary), their familiarity with research skills cannot be taken for granted, and their proficiency in English should be assessed and enhanced early on. Given the cumbersome procedure required to update the curriculum, an introductory week could be established when all postgraduate students become acquainted with key aspects of research skills, resources and writing.

A3. Curriculum – Doctoral Programme**APPROACH**

The objective of the Department's doctoral programme is to train highly skilled researchers, aiming at employment in both the private and the public sector.

IMPLEMENTATION

The practice in Greek Universities is that there is no taught PhD curriculum per se. This poses the question of PhD students who are not supplied with the necessary motivation and resources to acquire high-level training and finish their studies within a reasonable amount of time. Within this general context, the Department is not an exception. This is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed, given the general socioeconomic context, the high number of enrolled and "stagnating" PhD students (especially after the merger of the two Departments), and the Department's interdisciplinary and "area studies" focus. The EEC commends the recent effort to deliver lectures on specific methodological topics in the postgraduate seminar series. However, this should take the form of a more structured doctoral course, involving all faculty members.

RESULTS

The doctoral programme has been growing considerably, currently numbering 88 students (41 from the former Florina Department). The admissions rate is extraordinarily high (almost 100% of applicants are admitted). The completion rate is, for the moment, quite low, although it should be taken into account that the programme itself is relatively new.

The EEC noticed that the average completion period has had a tendency to decrease (5.25 years in 2012-2013, compared to an average of 6 years over the last 6 years). At the same time, the Department has highlighted that the number of doctoral students "freezing" their studies for work reasons has been increasing due to the general socioeconomic conditions in Greece. The Department expressed its concerns for the fact that the current legislative framework does not allow it to terminate "stagnating" doctoral enrolments or to provide meaningful funding to its doctoral students. The EEC notes that, until this issue is resolved, particular emphasis should be placed on the admissions and the monitoring processes.

Overall, the doctoral programme is an area where structural changes could immediately take effect. Currently, the doctoral programme appears to be heavily 'supervisor-oriented'. This approach may have several positive aspects, such as frequent communication between the student, the supervisor and the doctoral dissertation committee. However, this may create an isolation of the PhD student and inhibit his/her integration in the research community. It is significant in this respect that, during the site visit, the EEC did not meet with a single PhD

student. For this reason, the international practice leans towards processes and milestones at specific intervals, which set up pre-determined guidelines for both the supervisor and the student, monitored by the Department. The doctoral programme should be driven by systematic processes rather than relying so heavily on individual goodwill.

IMPROVEMENT

The Department is aware of the challenges regarding the doctoral programme and has already sketched a certain number of reforms (such as the introduction of certain financial incentives for students, in the form of travel funds and awards).

The EEC further proposes the following:

Recommendation A.3.1

The Department should consider creating a formalized framework for monitoring the admissions, progress, and completion of doctoral students. International practice frequently involves a 2-part admission decision requiring agreement between the supervisor and the Department. The Department can introduce the role of Director of Doctoral Studies, who would report to the Department during its monthly meeting and could be assigned these tasks under the auspices of the Department.

Recommendation A.3.2

The EEC recommends the design of milestones that doctoral students have to achieve in regular intervals, where clearly defined outcomes would be expected (e.g. a detailed research proposal by the end of the first year). This could be included in a doctoral studies agreement between the student, the supervisor, the Doctoral Committee and the Department, clearly specifying each party's responsibilities and obligations.

Recommendation A.3.3

The Department should strongly consider designing one or two dedicated doctoral research methods courses, which would cover fundamental areas for all students as well as offer more focused sessions on specific methodological tools in their respective fields. The issue of whether these courses should be assessed or not (and how) can be internally discussed further, but at least its provision to doctoral students should be a requirement.

Recommendation A.3.4

The Department should complement/transform the existing informal seminar series dedicated to doctoral students where all students and staff annually present their ongoing research work. This will allow doctoral students to feel valued members of a research community. It will also allow all parties involved to get feedback from each other in a collegial atmosphere, exploit synergies within a closely tied network and identify areas for joint work and eventual research projects.

Recommendation A.3.5

The EEC recommends establishing doctoral stipends, if the legislative framework and the Department's financial resources allow it. These could take the form of research/teaching assistantships, in order to both attract highly-qualified candidates and to incentivize a faster rate of completion.

Recommendation A.3.6

The Department should consider creating a procedure for monitoring the graduating PhD

students' career integration and path, either in academic or non-academic positions. This could be one of the tasks of the Director of Postgraduate and Doctoral Studies.

B1. Teaching – Undergraduate Programme

APPROACH

The courses in the Department's undergraduate programme are delivered by highly skilled academics with substantial expertise in their respective fields. This effort seems to be very well received by students who have provided positive feedback through regular teaching evaluations, as well as during a brief meeting of the EEC with student representatives. Overall, students and staff seem to be highly motivated in ensuring a collegiate and productive teaching process in the background of a significantly challenging landscape regarding the Greek higher education system.

The EEC was not made aware of a clearly defined pedagogical policy adopted by the Department. Instead, the very high teaching standards observed appear to be driven primarily by individual academics' strong commitment and enthusiasm.

The Department's approach to teaching at the undergraduate programme is influenced very heavily by the general framework and constraints that are set by the State. The dramatically high number of undergraduate students (on which the Department has little, if any, control), in particular, has resulted in the teaching process relying almost exclusively on lectures (4 hours per course per week) delivered to very large audiences. This practice is more pronounced in compulsory courses during the first two years of the undergraduate programme. Elective courses offered during the last two years of the programme involve significantly smaller audiences, but they are still based predominantly on lectures. Language courses also constitute a noticeable exception, where students are assigned to much smaller groups (around 25 students each). A minority of non-language courses involve an additional hour of seminar or lab work (in addition to the 4 hours of lectures), depending on content, where students have the opportunity to work in much smaller groups and, thus, enjoy the benefits of greater interaction in class.

The negative impact on teaching quality of this high (and upwards trending) student-to-staff ratio is also exacerbated by the very large number of courses that are offered to undergraduate students. Approximately 100 courses are available to students, who are required to pass 48 courses to complete the programme. As a result, large student audiences are not split into smaller groups and the number of seminars and lab sessions remains very low (also affected by limitations in terms of suitable teaching facilities). Clearly the wide range of courses offered can be considered, in isolation, as a very positive element of the programme (also highlighted by students during their meeting with the EEC) and it reflects the programme's strong interdisciplinary nature. However, the large number of courses might be an unaffordable luxury for the Department given its significantly constrained resources. A robust re-examination of the curriculum has already been initiated by the Department, and its outcome should lead to a reallocation of resources to meet the students' learning needs more effectively.

The assessment pattern is predominantly based on final exams at the end of each semester, with a minority of courses also involving midterm exams and courseworks. This pattern seems to be necessitated by the lack of resources (staff and facilities) as well as the expanding student population. This strong focus on assessment through final exams is almost certain to result in students not having the opportunity to develop valuable transferable skills (such as working in groups, giving presentations, conducting some basic research etc.) to a level

expected from an undergraduate programme.

The Department makes extensive use of information technologies to support the teaching process. All instructors use the internal platform (COMPUS) to upload relevant course material (syllabus, lecture notes, practice questions, past exams etc.), as well as to post announcements for each course.

IMPLEMENTATION

Course instructors make extensive use of information technologies in the teaching process. Students can use their personal accounts to access all relevant material for each course, including syllabi, lecture notes, practice questions and past exams. The teaching material is typically updated regularly, although the EEC noticed some cases with significantly outdated material. No significant evidence was found of systematically connecting teaching with research.

The international nature of the programme is well supported by the significant opportunities afforded to students who wish to study abroad for a fixed period by participating in the ERASMUS programme. The Department has successfully negotiated a very large number of agreements with partner foreign universities, mainly in Balkan countries and Turkey, which is to be strongly commended. Nevertheless, the number of students who actually participate in the ERASMUS programme every year is not as high as would be expected from an undergraduate programme with a very clear emphasis on internationalization.

The international focus of the Department's teaching is also served by a small number of courses that are delivered in English and are primarily targeted to incoming ERASMUS students, although theoretically available to domestic students as well. The participation of visiting academics from foreign institutions in teaching also enhances the international nature of the undergraduate programme.

The Department maintains a commendable record of student placements. A large number of undergraduate students have completed placements in local businesses, institutions and public bodies, with some placements abroad also recorded. This constitutes a very important part of the learning process, allowing students to obtain practical experience, develop transferable skills, begin to establish their professional network and, ultimately, enhance their career prospects after graduation. This placement programme needs to be very carefully maintained, and even developed further to the extent possible, as it represents a very distinct competitive advantage of the Department's undergraduate programme.

Student satisfaction with teaching seems to be relatively high, as evidenced by positive voluntary evaluations completed by students for the majority of courses. The response rate was reasonably high. Furthermore, during the EEC's meeting with student representatives, the prevailing view expressed was that of a high degree of satisfaction by the teaching process in the Department (with the exception of very large class sizes and potentially suboptimal timetabling). However, although teaching evaluations constitute a regular activity within the Department, their use in improving teaching practice is not clear. No specific process has been established to explore the evaluation results and to take corrective action if needed.

RESULTS

The pass rate in the undergraduate programme is reasonable, perhaps even relatively high within the context of the Greek higher education system. However, the variability of pass rates among different courses is by no means insignificant. The distribution of final degree marks was reasonable, heavily centered around 7 out of 10. The ratio of graduates to non-graduates was modest, albeit not uncharacteristic of the Greek higher education system.

Lecture attendance and participation in exams are significantly low. In addition, the number of students well exceeding the expected length of studies (4+2 years) is worryingly high, although common in Greek universities and not easily controllable by the Department. The above represent very important concerns, which were also recognized by the Department.

IMPROVEMENT

Teaching quality in the undergraduate programme is very high, by any reasonable standards. The Department should carefully maintain, and even improve on, this performance. In addition to relying on individual academics' self-motivation and commitment, this effort needs to be properly supported by well-defined structures.

The Department's view is that the main concerns regarding teaching (low attendance at lectures, low participation in exams, and large number of "perpetual" students) can be primarily attributed to the institutional framework, the large audience sizes and to suboptimal timetabling, which represent significant disincentives for students. As a corrective measure, the Department intends to examine the possibility of considerably decreasing class sizes through appropriate changes in the curriculum (see previous Section). This is a very reasonable and much-needed reform.

The EEC further proposes the following:

Recommendation B.1.1

The Department should consider a much more extensive adoption of alternative assessment methods (e.g. mid-term exams, individual and group courseworks, presentations etc.). This change would ensure a more holistic approach to assessing students' academic progress, provide early and constructive feedback, and potentially help students feel more involved in the teaching process, hopefully improving attendance in lectures and participation in the final exams.

Recommendation B.1.2

The EEC recommends a stronger emphasis on the development of transferable skills, such as team work, presentation skills, and independent investigation of relevant topics. This can be achieved by adopting a greater variety of assessment methods (as suggested above), reducing class sizes through a restructuring of the curriculum, and systematically aiming for much greater interaction with students during sessions.

Recommendation B.1.3

The Department should consider making a greater effort to motivate students to participate in the ERASMUS programme. In addition to the University's annual ERASMUS orientation session, the Department can organize regular sessions where the details and, more importantly, the benefits of participating in the ERASMUS programme are explained to

students. Previous participants should also be invited to present their own experiences from the programme, thereby encouraging their colleagues to consider this as a particularly important element of a programme that is clearly international in nature.

Recommendation B.1.4

The international nature of the teaching process should be strengthened further by offering domestic students a greater number of courses in English (most likely electives).

Recommendation B.1.5

A well-defined process should be established to draw conclusions from the students' evaluation of teaching and to propose suitable actions for improvement if required. This could be achieved by creating a role of Director of Learning & Teaching (or by forming a respective committee) with the mandate to continuously monitor teaching practice and setting an appropriate agenda for improving teaching standards. All course instructors, and especially more junior academics, would stand to benefit greatly from this process.

B2. Teaching – Postgraduate Programme

APPROACH

Teaching practice in the Department's postgraduate programme is to an extent similar, albeit not identical, to that observed with respect to the undergraduate programme, especially in terms of delivery being predominantly based on lectures. However, postgraduate classes are considerably smaller in size, allowing for a more meaningful interaction with students. All teaching material is also available on-line. The international element is even more pronounced in the postgraduate programme, as evidenced by the considerable proportion of foreign students and the fact that all courses are offered in English.

IMPLEMENTATION

The postgraduate programme offers a more constructive learning environment. Smaller groups allow for a more meaningful interaction with students. The international focus is even more prevalent, with a considerable number of foreign students and all courses delivered in English. All students are also offered the opportunity to take (non-credit) language courses in the university, while courses in the Greek language are also available to non-native speakers. This provision is particularly commendable, since it further highlights the programme's international focus.

Regular courseworks contribute towards a more applied nature of the learning process and the development of transferable skills. However, the EEC noticed that the feedback that is returned for student reports is not as detailed as would be expected.

The teaching process is regularly evaluated through questionnaires completed by students on a voluntary basis, similarly to the undergraduate programme. However, no specific process is in place to analyze the outcomes of this exercise.

RESULTS

The postgraduate programme has a very high pass rate and proportion of graduates, reflecting its more flexible framework, the high quality students who are recruited and the

motivation and skills of the academic staff involved. Student evaluations are very positive. The EEC's meeting with student representatives further confirmed the students' positive view of the postgraduate programme.

Anecdotal evidence provided by the Department suggested good employability prospects for postgraduate students. However, no data is systematically collected with respect to alumni. One graduate of the programme (who was present in the meeting) signalled her intention to continue her studies at a PhD level, which is always a very encouraging outcome for a Master's programme.

IMPROVEMENT

Teaching at the Department's postgraduate programme is delivered to a very high standard. In the interest of further improving teaching quality, the EEC proposes the following:

Recommendation B.2.1

The Department should consider offering a course on "Research Methods" as part of its postgraduate programme. This course would not necessarily need to be credit-bearing. Alternatively, it could be structured as a series of seminars. In any case, training in research methods is essential for a high quality postgraduate programme, especially given that students are required to write a postgraduate dissertation during the summer term. This change would also emphasize the connection between teaching and research at the postgraduate level.

Recommendation B.1.5 also applies to the postgraduate programme.

B3. Teaching – Doctoral Programme

APPROACH

The doctoral programme is heavily based on the candidate's collaboration with the supervisor. This is a very typical approach in the Greek higher education system. Nevertheless, it is rather limiting. There is no structured teaching process associated with the doctoral programme.

IMPLEMENTATION

As was previously mentioned, the doctoral programme is driven almost exclusively by the candidate-supervisor meetings. Doctoral students have the option to attend any undergraduate or postgraduate course offered at the university in order to develop skills that they think are required for their research (in consultation with their supervisor).

Doctoral students are required to present their work annually in front of the academic staff and their fellow students. This enables the Department to gauge the progress made by each student and to offer feedback that would help towards maximizing future progress.

RESULTS

The Department currently has a large number of doctoral students (in excess of 80). At a first glance, this number can be interpreted as an indicator of a strong research culture within a

Department that employs less than 40 members of academic staff. On the other hand, the Department informed the EEC that the average completion time was around 5.5 years which, although not atypical of the Greek system, is nevertheless considerably high compared to international standards. The Department suggested that this statistic could be partially explained by the virtually non-existent scholarship income for doctoral students and the very restricting framework that governs the termination of student registrations in the case of insufficient progress.

IMPROVEMENT

The EEC proposes the following:

Recommendation B.3.1

The Department should seriously consider introducing a clear teaching element in its doctoral programme. The current provision of doctoral students being able to attend courses drawn from undergraduate or postgraduate programmes is highly unlikely to ensure their successful development of vital skills, either in terms of research methods in general or specific methodological topics. The EEC recommends that suitable research seminars are offered to doctoral students at a level appropriate to their needs, in order to help them develop the required research skills. These seminars should be delivered by academics in the Department, while more advanced doctoral students might potentially be involved in the delivery of these sessions as well. The seminars should explore some general issues of conducting research at a PhD level, specific research techniques and methodologies, as well as topics drawn from the staff's own research agendas. Generally, these programmes do not tend to have dramatically high resource requirements.

C. Research

APPROACH

Faculty members are actively engaged in research as evidenced by the large number of research outputs such as monographs, journal articles and contributions in, or authorships of, edited volumes. Nevertheless, the Department has vaguely defined research policy and objectives, partly reflecting its interdisciplinary orientation and nature, but also the lack of clear guidance regarding appropriate research outputs. The IER includes a relatively large number of research outputs such as conference proceedings, book reviews and articles in non peer-reviewed journals. The internal standards for assessing research are unclear and the emphasis on international, peer-reviewed publications is implicit rather than explicit. In the absence of clear goals and specific standards, research seems to be individually-driven rather than institutionally-induced.

IMPLEMENTATION

The university encourages high quality research by offering monetary rewards for publications in top journals, as ranked in university-compiled lists. It is commendable that the university authorities clearly signal a preference for research excellence.

At the Departmental level, the EEC did not find such a clear signaling of the importance of international, peer-reviewed, top-quality research. Although the Department acknowledges the importance of such research, and despite the fact that a considerable number of faculty members produce high quality scholarly work, the EEC did not come across clear indicators of research success (e.g. SSCI, the ABS ranking list, monographs in peer-reviewed internationally acknowledged publishers). Moreover, the EEC was not made aware of any regularized mentoring processes for junior faculty or a structure for research evaluation, apart from that integrated into the promotion process. The Department lacks a committee evaluating research and setting research standards and goals.

The Department organizes two seminar series, in which its PhD students are encouraged to present their work. Moreover, PhD students are encouraged to participate in international conferences through support offered by the university, and to publish their work in international journals prior to the completion of their dissertation.

At the undergraduate level, there is no evidence of efforts to connect teaching with research (see section B).

The Department lacks administrative research support for preparing research proposals and for implementing research programmes, despite its relative success in attracting external funding.

RESULTS

The Department has a reasonable publication record and considerable visibility in the international research community, as evidenced by the list of published works (monographs, journal articles and edited volumes) by its faculty, as well as by citations received. Reflecting the lack of clear signaling and the multidisciplinary nature of the Department, research

outputs display wide variation in terms of the degree of internationalization and quality. A number, albeit not the majority, of faculty members regularly publishes in highly respected international publication outlets, and some individual members have an international reputation. Some academics serve as editors or members in the editorial boards of international journals. A considerable portion of the Departmental research output is in Greek or in other non-peer reviewed outlets, which limits their international and scholarly impact and visibility. The IER, which includes aggregates of outputs like conference proceedings, book reviews and non peer-reviewed articles, displays a disproportionate emphasis on quantity. The EEC recognizes that the Department's IER was required to adhere to the template set by the University's Internal Evaluation Committee. The quantification of research outputs is not atypical of the Greek higher education system, but it might inadvertently distract attention from the overall quality of published work.

The Department has organized a number of international conferences with participation of well-recognized international academics.

In the past years, the Department has managed to attract external funding through a number of programmes. These programmes have been funded by public and private resources, from national and, less so, from international agencies. The IER specifies that a number of faculty members are the principal investigators in these research projects. In the absence of monetary data, the EEC found it difficult to assess the overall capacity of the Department to attract external funding. Based on the information provided, the EEC notes considerable asymmetry among faculty members in successful efforts to attract external funding.

Despite efforts to encourage the active involvement of PhD students in research activities, such involvement is limited. According to the IER, the number of students who presented their work in the two seminars was limited to 6 (out of 47).

IMPROVEMENT

The Department considers resource and institutional constraints as considerable impediments to improving research output. The EEC recognizes these constraints, but it believes that the Department can further facilitate research activity.

The EEC proposes the following:

Recommendation C.1

The Department should explicate its research strategy and objectives, and develop a research structure that induces an orientation toward international, peer-reviewed research. More specifically, the EEC recommends the establishment of a research committee with a clear mandate to engage the Department in a discussion on the establishment of research standards and preferable research outputs.

Recommendation C.2

A mentoring process for junior faculty members should be established, in conjunction with the institutionalization of internal evaluation of research outputs prior to promotion.

Recommendation C.3

The Department should introduce an appropriate incentive structure for research success

through the adoption of explicit general indicators of quality for journal and book publications (e.g. SSCI or the ABS ranking list for journal articles), and through the provision of well-defined rewards for research excellence.

Recommendation C.4

The EEC recommends the introduction of measures to more effectively disseminate Departmental research through the organization of a research seminar in which faculty will present their research to each other and to PhD students. This will help faculty become better aware of each other's work and enhance collaboration. It will also facilitate the improvement of the Department's research culture. In addition, the Department should consider the circulation of a quarterly newsletter with all latest research outputs produced by its faculty.

Recommendation C.5

The University and the Department should facilitate the integration of externally funded research of individual faculty members within the broader research strategy of the Department. The integration can include the utilization of resources for establishing administrative research support (for submitting research proposals) or for supporting top PhD candidates. It can also support the purchase of expensive software or datasets to facilitate research.

Recommendation C.6

The EEC strongly encourages the Department to establish a more rigorous and engaged doctoral student community. This can be achieved by linking the progress and success of doctoral students with their active research engagement, including their attendance in joint faculty and student research seminars, and the presentation of research results. More importantly, the Department can consider utilizing monetary resources from its Master's programme to offer scholarships to its top doctoral candidates.

Recommendation C.7

The Department should consider facilitating the internationalization of research outputs published in Greek by supporting their publication in other languages. Given the significant volume of work published in Greek and the unique focus of the Department, funds can be used from the Master's programme to encourage the translation of this research in English.

D. All Other Services

APPROACH

The EEC's impression was that academic staff is generally satisfied with the level of academic services provided, given the significantly limited resources available. Faculty and administrative personnel seem to be cooperating in an efficient and collegiate way. Interactions with students provided positive input on the Department's unit programmes. However, students referred to the lack of well-defined systematic processes with regard to student accommodation, job opportunities after graduation etc. This is an acute problem for all students and for overseas students in particular.

Most administrative procedures are processed electronically, although the extent of automatization was not clear. No policy for simplifying administrative procedures was highlighted.

IMPLEMENTATION

During the second day of the site visit, the EEC visited the Department's Administration Office, mainly responsible for the undergraduate programme, and the Postgraduate Office, which is mainly responsible for the postgraduate and the PhD programmes. The Administration Office operates with 4 people, including the Head of the Unit, whilst the Postgraduate Office with one person. The EEC had the opportunity to discuss with all five members of staff.

IT services appear to be administered mainly at a departmental level, although a central IT function is also run by the University. The EEC did not have the opportunity to visit the Student Welfare Office or the International Relations Office. With regards to the Erasmus Office, the EEC was surprised to learn that the sole IT lab member of staff is also providing administrative support for the Erasmus programme. Library services are available to all students (on site and remotely).

RESULTS

The stress of the merger was also inflicted on the Administration Office of the Department as well as the Postgraduate Office. Both offices work efficiently and staff is supportive to faculty and students. However, it would be helpful if administrative services expand their mandate (time- and task-wise) in order to meet the increasingly demanding faculty schedule. Both Offices expressed the need for more space.

The library equally is providing a good service, including electronic remote access as well as Saturday opening hours. The library also experienced a shortage of space.

The EEC had the opportunity to visit general university infrastructure, including classrooms, IT labs, faculty and administration offices and the gym. It was obvious that there is lack of space both in terms of offices and numbers of classrooms, as well as seminar/meeting rooms where students and faculty could meet. This is hoped to be improved by the purchase of a new building. The lack of funding is reflected in the bad condition of certain rooms, i.e. not painted walls, old furniture etc. There is access to university premises by people with special

needs and the library has also working stations for people with hearing and sight problems. Unfortunately, the non-smoking policy is not respected by the university community.

The EEC also visited the Department's IT lab, operated by one member of staff and the Central University IT lab staffed by 22 people. IT labs were in relative terms well equipped and supported, although certain equipment such as computers was outdated. The web pages of both the University and the Department are not adequately designed and, thus, need to be further improved and updated in order to serve efficiently as a point of entry for interested parties.

As a final point, it was evident by the visit that some of the administrative services are "labour intensive" i.e. occupy many low skilled people but are not "knowledge intensive" i.e. not highly qualified. This type of administrative support is outdated and it compromises the effort of the Department and the University to achieve international reputation.

IMPROVEMENTS

The EEC proposes the following:

Recommendation D.1

The EEC recommends that tenured administrative staff expand their mandate to some tasks that are currently undertaken (unofficially) by the Postgraduate Office and IT lab personnel. Additionally, since one of the core strategic goals of the Department is to further internationalize, it should be ensured that all administrative staff are competent in English (at least), or even more languages, have good IT skills and a University level degree. Within the existing framework, an effort should be made for the replacement of low skilled administrative personnel with qualified personnel in order to support specialized administrative services more efficiently.

Recommendation D.2

The Department should strongly consider a revamp of its webpage. The design should be updated, more information should be provided and, most importantly, all information should be available in both Greek and English.

Collaboration with social, cultural and production organizations

The Department maintains an active collaboration with non-academic organizations. The students have the opportunity to study Hebrew and Armenian languages taught by teachers of the relevant communities of Thessaloniki. Faculty members take part in the cultural activities of the Hebrew, Arabic and Armenian communities of the city. Reports by the consuls of East-European countries are held in the Department, as well as receptions of high-ranked persons, such as the Patriarch of Constantinople. Faculty members also give invited talks to various educational and cultural institutions.

E. Strategic Planning, Perspectives for Improvement and Dealing with Potential Inhibiting Factors

The Department addressed issues of short- and medium-term planning in the IER (p.82-84) with regards to the challenges it faces in its teaching and research, as well as administrative related activities. During the site visit, a two-page document on the short- and medium-term planning, including recommended implementation measures, was distributed to the EEC. On the second day of the site visit, the Department also highlighted that its strategic vision is centered on establishing itself as a unique academic unit that promotes internationalization and mutual understanding between “neighbours” in the Balkans and the East.

In the short-term, the Department intends to focus on:

- Redesigning the curriculum of the undergraduate programme. This is hoped to ensure a more efficient allocation of resources, especially given the new environment after the merger. The Curriculum Committee is scheduled to convene in April 2014.
- Formulating the Department’s Internal Regulations Framework, for both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This is planned to take place after the new “post-restructuring” university unit has been officially established.
- Continuing and strengthening the efforts to update the IT resources (hardware, software, databases) supporting the faculty’s research.
- Supporting the students’ future employment opportunities through the ERASMUS programme, the agreement for collaboration which was signed with the Bulgarian Consul (Fall 2013) regarding international placements for students, and the QUESS programme which explores students’ attitudes towards entrepreneurship.
- Launching its partnership with the University of Bamberg (Germany).
- Utilizing the scholarship funds (€260,000) secured by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to support the postgraduate and doctoral programmes, as well as to increase the international mobility of faculty members.

In the medium- and long-term, the Department intends to focus on:

- Creating a Summer School (community learning) offering courses related to the Department’s teaching and research areas. This programme is hoped to provide additional funds to support the Department’s activities.
- Creating a platform for on-line (distance) learning.
- Continuing and strengthening the efforts to recruit 3 additional members of staff to support the teaching of languages.
- Continuing and finalizing the process of establishing new postgraduate programmes in collaboration with the Institute for History of the University of Graz, the Tavrida National V.I. Vernadsky University, the Institute of International Relations of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kiev, and the Supreme Joint War College in Greece.

The EEC positively commends on the short-term activities which are in the phase of completion, such as the postgraduate programme agreements with foreign academic institutions. The Department also appears to have a reasonable set of medium-term plans, related primarily to teaching. However, the EEC feels that the current planning strategy perhaps reflects mainly the priorities of the old (pre-merger) Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies at the University of Macedonia. A wider long-term strategy is needed, with a clearly specified vision, goals and implementation planning of the new integrated Department, as in the existing documents there are only some vague points with regard to

the long-term future of the Department.

In this context, the EEC recommends that the Department develops a clear strategic plan with a 5 year horizon. The Department should concentrate its efforts not only to prioritize solutions in the short run, but also design and implement a longer term strategic plan. This is deemed particularly necessary at this point of time, when the Department is in transition (due to the recent merger), as this transition period could determine the future and sustainability of the Department. Thus, the Department has a great opportunity to establish itself as a unit with unique competitive advantages around its multidisciplinary character and internationalization orientation.

The EEC feels that the Head of the Department (HoD) should be assisted by all members of faculty towards this direction. In this spirit, the EEC recommends the creation of an Executive Committee comprising of faculty of all ranks and disciplines, reflecting the multidimensional nature of the new integrated Department. This committee, under the HoD, will be responsible for the design and implementation of the Department's Strategic Plan. It is recommended that this committee meets at least twice a year and, in one of these yearly meetings, the Dean and the Provost should participate as well. This will secure alignment of strategic goals among the Department, the School and the University.

The Strategic Plan as well as specific implementation measures are highlighted in the comments of the EEC in previous sections of this report, referring to teaching, research and other services, around the pillars of :

1. A well-defined Pedagogical Strategy
2. A creative and updated curriculum
3. A well-defined Research Strategy
4. Administrative support by sophisticated human resources

F. Final Conclusions and recommendations of the EEC

The general impression of the EEC for the Department is positive. It has a unique academic mandate, it is extrovert and it is willing to further pursue academic excellence in teaching and research.

The main challenge from now on is to deal effectively, in the short run, with the issues that have emerged from the merger, and in the medium and long run to truly become an integrated Department.

The EEC feels that the successful integration process depends largely on strategic planning, the role of leadership, support from the School and Provost's Office and the team spirit that faculty and staff exhibit. The integrated Department has a realistic potential to attain its long term strategic goal of international and national academic leadership as long as it achieves its integration with a spirit of consensus, respect and equality among the stakeholders involved. It should, thus, set clearly defined international standards in teaching and research, expand its interaction with the local and international communities in a more consistent and sustainable manner, and operate with the support of sophisticated administrative resources. The EEC has addressed issues related to teaching, research, administration, strategy and leadership in detail in the EER, in an effort to provide the Department with helpful recommendations towards the Department's vision.

The opinions, comments and recommendations in this report should be considered within the general context of the Greek higher education system, which is financed and highly regulated by the Ministry of Education and other state agencies. The regulatory framework affects all aspects of university domains, including finances, admissions policies, staff recruitment and progression, curriculum design, and teaching provision. The Department operates within this regulatory framework, thus facing constraints and challenges that often prohibit independent and autonomous decision making and which affect its operational flexibility and strategic planning.

The EEC understands these constraints. The adoption of a more flexible legal framework, that allows real self-governance, will motivate, through competition, academic excellence among universities in Greece.