



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

HELLENIC REPUBLIC

Α.ΔΙ.Π.

H.Q.A.

ΑΡΧΗ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ & ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ
ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΝΩΤΑΤΗ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ

HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE
AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY



European Union
European Social Fund



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

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External Evaluation Committee

The Committee responsible for the External Evaluation of the Department of Special Education of the University of Thessaly consisted of the following four (4) expert evaluators drawn from the Registry constituted by the HQA in accordance with Law 3374/2005 :

1. **Professor Panayiotis Angelides**, University of Nicosia, Cyprus
2. **Dr. Lucas Amiras**, University of Education, Weingarten, Germany
3. **Associate Professor Antonis Tsakmakis**
University of Cyprus, Department of Classics and Philosophy, Cyprus
4. **Professor Yiannis Dimitriadis**, University of Valladolid, Spain

Introduction

I. The External Evaluation Procedure

The External Evaluation Committee (EEC) visited the Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly during the period of December 9 – 11, 2013. The EEC received the Department's Internal Evaluation Report (IER) on 21st November 2013.

During the first day of our visit, EEC members attended an orientation and briefing at the HQA offices from 9:30-11 am, by Professor Memos, to set the stage and provide contextual information on the role of the committee.

The program of the visit was the following:

Monday, Dec 9th

Meeting with the staff of the Department and the Vice-rector for academic affairs Athanasios Koustelios. The vice-rector presented the history and the structure of the university. The briefing from the vice-rector was followed by constructive discussion with all staff members of the department on a range of issues associated with resources and other administrative issues at the University of Thessaly. This discussion was situated in the general context of the Greek Higher Education landscape, which in recent years has been characterized by severe budget cuts and restructuring due to austerity measures and legislation changes.

Tuesday Dec 10th

Meeting with the department faculty at the main conference room of the Department of Special Education (SED).

EEC attended presentations from the following faculty:

- Philippos Vlachos, Head of SED
- Ch. Karayiannides & E. Gana (Undergraduate programs)
- K. Botsoglou & S. Tzivinikou (Practicum of undergraduate students)
- A. Karapetsas, G. Kleftaras & D. Vavouyios (Laboratories of the department)
- P. Stavrousi & E. Didaskalou (Research and Development)
- S. Paraskeuopoulos (Publications)
- D. Vavouyios & E. Dermitzaki (Teaching)
- V. Argyropoulos & A. Sapountzaki (Teaching methods for the deaf and blind)

- I. Nisiotou & M. Nikolarazi (Mobility-Erasmus)
- M. Nikolarazi & I. Nisiotou (Contribution to the society)
- M. Nikolarazi (Student support)

- Meeting with Students (approximately 20 students)
 - Undergraduate students (primarily in the 4th year of studies)
 - Postgraduate students (Masters and Ph.D.)
 - Recent graduates

- Meetings with SED faculty
- Meeting with the administrative staff
- Meeting with Special Laboratory Personnel

Wednesday Dec 11th

- Visit to the university library, meeting with the library director.
- Visit to the research committee, meeting with the vice-rector of public and international relations, innovation and entrepreneurship Dimitrios Kouretas.

Meeting with the department faculty at the main conference room of the Department of Special Education.

EEC attended presentations from the following faculty:

- G. Andreou (Master's in Special Education)
- G. Kleftaras (Master's in Counseling)
- A. Vlachou (Doctoral Studies)
- S. Tzivinikou (on-line platform)

At the end of the visit the EEC met with the rector of the University Ioannis Messinis.

In addition to the IER, the EEC requested and examined a number of additional documents including the following:

- Faculty CVs
- Program of Study (Study Guide), 2013-2014
- Course syllabi
- Sample student assessments including assessments conducted during school

practicum and field experience.

- PhD proposals
- Master theses
- Student artifacts (e.g., student projects, reports, etc.)
- Copies of slides of all presentations prepared by SED faculty in anticipation of our visit.

We visited some of the Department's facilities including:

- Faculty offices
- Administrative staff offices
- Laboratories

We also attended a seminar and a lecture (around half hour for each)

II. The Internal Evaluation Procedure

The Internal Evaluation Committee (IEC) delivered the updated Internal Evaluation Report (IER) for the academic year 2012-2013, following the guidelines provided by the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA). The report included the basic information and evidence required in order to fulfill its objectives and was accompanied by the Study Program Guide of the SED department. The IEC also willingly provided a complete CD with additional information, as well as supporting evidence of qualitative and quantitative nature. Finally, during the review process all SED faculty members willingly provided all information that was required by the EEC.

Overall, the global set of sources and documentation provided was appropriate, containing multiple and complementary types of information. The attitude of the IEC and the complete department was very positive towards providing all necessary information and evidence to the EEC. On the other hand, the internal evaluation process was completed in a satisfactory way according to the guidelines provided by the HQA.

A. Curriculum

Undergraduate

APPROACH

The SED offers a four years Undergraduate Program in Special Education with two specializations (Pre-Primary Special Education and Primary Special Education).

Its main objectives are the education of Teachers of Special Education for Pre-Primary and Primary Schools. The program offers specialization in the education of the following categories of people with special needs:

- students with learning disabilities
- hard of hearing and deaf students
- students with visual impairments
- students with mental disabilities
- students with autism spectrum disorders

The objectives of the Department are explicitly specified by the law. As the only University Department in Greece which is fully focused on Special Education the SED further envisages to enhance special education and to provide expert support to institutions involved in special education throughout the country, as well as advance research and development in special education.

The Undergraduate Program in Special Education was first established in 1998/99 and aims at providing scientifically-based education for future special teachers. The Program of Studies is organized into 4 thematic areas: Special Education, Pedagogy-Sociology, Psychology-Language, Sciences. Obligatory courses are: Special Education (9 courses), Pedagogy-Sociology (3 courses), Psychology-Language (5 courses), Sciences (5 courses). Besides, there are four courses in a foreign language (or alternatively Braille or sign language) and a module consisting of 4 practica at schools. In addition there are 30 restrictive electives and electives. These are subdivided in 12 courses in Special Education, 6 in Pedagogy/Sociology, 8 in Psychology/Language and 6 in Science. They can be selected out of 64 offered courses. A Diploma thesis is optional, and can replace 4 electives.

Since there is an acute need for special teachers in Greece, the degree is attractive for prospect students. This ensures the quality and high motivation of students admitted. The needs of the market and the current situation of special education in Greece have been taken into consideration in the design of the Curriculum.

Yearly adaptations of the Program of Studies are made according to international standards, the evolving needs as well as due to the lack of human and financial resources. Decisions are the result of thorough discussions among the staff and are taken collectively. Students'

representatives are included in the discussion, and the students' evaluation of courses and recommendations are taken into consideration. The EEC noted that the SED faculty shows flexibility and devotion to its mission, and is sensitive to scholarly developments and contemporary societal needs.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Department's goal is implemented by the undergraduate curriculum. However, the Curriculum is to a large part knowledge-based. Exposure to early practicum and field experiences is limited since it is restricted in years 3 (general schools) and 4 (special schools).

The curriculum is rational and clearly articulated. Furthermore, it is coherent and functional. The majority of the required courses are in line with recommended practices in the education of special teachers, but the introduction of a more inclusive approach is desired.

The traditional field of 'special' education, not only in Greece but in many other parts of the world as well, faces one of the deepest challenges in its history: it is merging with 'mainstream' education. This means that children who may in the past have been served primarily by 'special' teachers in segregated settings are increasingly becoming the concern of every educator.

The idea of inclusive education has dominated the development of curricula as well as the development of the educational systems of many countries in the world. Inclusive education does not simply refer to the placement of children categorised as having special needs into mainstream schools, but it is also concerned with the conditions under which we can effectively educate all children. The main purpose of this process is the education of *all* children regardless of differences, problems, and difficulties. This can be considered as a school for all. Such a school accepts *all* children, understands their individuality, and responds to their individual needs.

The initial education of teachers and special teachers influences significantly their future practice and it is important to highlight that teachers have a significant role to play in the success of inclusive education. In most countries of the world education is divided into 'special' and 'regular' education, something that impacts upon teacher education where teachers are again divided into 'special' and 'regular' categories.

Our suggestion is that the curricula of the department should pay more attention to certain

theoretical and philosophical matters that are related to issues of difference and to the philosophical background of what we call ‘special education’ in order to enable future teachers to scrutinise and analyse the existing views and stereotypes (special needs, racism, sex, race, socio-economical situation). This is something that is not existent in the curriculum of the institution we studied. Thus, future special teachers can go behind certain events and situations, and discover the historical, social and cultural contexts in which they took place.

As is usual, the Program of Study inevitably reflects the specializations of individual faculty members and the limitations of the staff numbers. For example courses in pedagogy have been reduced to a minimum as a result of loss of personnel. Up to 2012 the Department could rely on additional contract lecturers in areas where no members of Faculty existed. Hiring of contract faculty is no more possible since 2012 and this threatens the balance of the courses offered. At present a deficit of courses in Theater education, Arts and Music Education, as well as Literature is noted. A strength of the curriculum is the emphasis on neuropsychological aspects of special education.

Practicum supervision requires the collaboration of expert staff which is co-ordinated by members of the Department. It also requires a network of teachers and schools for the placement of all students. This is only achieved through constant efforts of the staff and the enthusiasm of a community of specialized personnel involved in these activities (επόπτες). It is to be noted that this year the successful completion of the practicum program was only made possible due to voluntary supervision of graduates and other specialized teachers who had been collaborating with the Department in previous years.

RESULTS

SED has a solid reputation evident by the high quality of the students it has been attracting during the National Entrance Examinations. The SED faculty consistently praised the quality of their student body.

SED faculty displays an awareness of the challenging market situation and the need to maintain high standards in order to effectively approve the situation of disabled persons who are currently marginalized and victimized in Greek society. Further, SED faculty emphasized that graduates of the program are well-prepared to engage in research activities to an unusual degree according to standard expectations from undergraduate programs. Employability and maximization of the qualification of those who acquire the Diploma are among the

Department's priorities.

IMPROVEMENT

The faculty of the SED are well aware of the possibilities and challenges of special education and have expert knowledge of current developments in the international field. However the SED is faced with unfavorable conditions and is deeply concerned about future shortages of means. Nevertheless it has a plan to collaborate with the two other Departments of Education which belong to the same School, in order to monitor the course offer in basic subjects and maximize the effectiveness of teaching.

In the course of the last years the Department has repeatedly addressed the Ministry of Education in order to offer its expertise in the subject as well as in order to make the needs of the education of special teachers understood. Suggested improvements include the appointment of new faculty (including specialized personnel - *επόπτες*) in the disciplines which are understaffed and the creation of new laboratories.

Postgraduate Program MSc “ Special Education”

APPROACH

The Program's objective is to provide knowledge and to enhance the development of skills which are necessary for the effective education of persons with special educational needs. It is addressed to graduates from various fields, especially to teachers of all levels of education. A primary goal of the program is to develop new teaching approaches, educational interventions and apply up-to-date scientific knowledge in educational practice.

At this stage only one specialization in “Education of Individuals with Special Needs” is offered, following the Departmental Decision of 8-4-2009. It combines theory, methodology and practice.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Program is coherent and functional. It consists of 120 ECTS and has a duration of 4 semesters. It includes 12 courses (1 is a restrictive elective, another is an independent study under the supervision of a member of the faculty that leads to a dissertation; it provides preparation for the research and writing of the Masters thesis), a practicum of 10 ECTS and a Masters thesis which is credited with 20 ECTS.

Various educational and social institutions, both governmental and private host the students

<p>making their practicum in collaboration with supervisors, who often belong to these institutions.</p> <p>The Program is consistent with the objectives of the Department and meets the whole range of its mission as defined by the law. Especially the practicum aims at the association of theory and practice, the development of practical skills for the educational and social support of individuals with special needs, etc.</p>
<p>RESULTS</p> <p>The Program is of high importance for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and for the improvement of services provided to individuals with special needs. This dissemination is crucial for the implementation of innovative policies aiming at the inclusion of individuals with special needs in society. The Department also displays a remarkable readiness to change society views; this may be understood as an element of their scientific identity.</p>
<p>IMPROVEMENT</p> <p>The Department has already designed two further specializations within the Program. These concern “Learning Disabilities” and “Language Development, Language Pathology and Educational Intervention”.</p> <p>Both specializations will satisfy high academic requirements and meet acute social needs. The state should provide the necessary resources for the introduction of both. At present the Program admits students every two years, due to the limited staff numbers.</p>
<p><u>Postgraduate Program MSc "Counseling in Special–General Education and Health"</u></p> <p>APPROACH</p> <p>The Program’s primary objective is specialization in Counseling Psychology particularly in education, health and special education settings. It provides not only theoretical knowledge but also cultivates high-level professional skills for people working in Counseling Psychology and Counseling.</p> <p>The Program is subdivided in two specializations: “Counseling in Education/School Counseling” and “Counseling in Psychic Health/Psychotherapy”. Both combine theory, methodology, and practice.</p> <p>The Program is offered since 2009. The evaluation of the Program by students is seriously taken into account for its improvement.</p>

The practicum aims at the development of practical skills for the educational and social support of individuals with special needs.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Program is coherent and functional. It consists of 120 ECTS and has a duration of 4 semesters. It includes 12 courses (1 is a restrictive elective, another is a independent study), a practicum of 14 ECTS and a Masters thesis which is credited with 20 ECTS. Attendance of counseling sessions is also required (1100 hours).

The teaching staff includes 35 members from 8 Universities and 26 experts in various places in Greece, giving the opportunity to students who live in cities other than Volos to do their practice in their home place.

The Program is consistent with the objectives of the Department and meets the whole range of its mission as defined by the law.

RESULTS

The Program is officially recognized by both state authorities and scientific and professional associations and it has an international reputation. An impressive record of conference papers, written by students in collaboration with their professors is a further proof of the Program's importance.

On the other hand, students frequently consider their workload as extremely high, especially the attendance of counseling sessions although they recognize the benefits from systematic training. This amount of workload is not reflected in the ECTS units as officially approved for the Program.

IMPROVEMENT

The Department envisages further improvement of the Program. It has been asked by professional associations to offer the Program in Cyprus.

The Program satisfies high academic requirements and meets acute needs of society. At present the Program admits students every two years, due to the limited staff numbers.

Doctoral studies

The Department has established a doctoral program of studies which concludes with a PhD dissertation. The procedures that have been followed are aligned with the related national laws. Overall, a significant number of doctoral theses have been submitted and defended, or are currently under development. The resulting scientific production in terms of scientific publications is satisfactory, with a significant

impact and recognition by the national and international communities.

There are several elements of the doctoral program that may be established or further enhanced. The Department has recently set up a doctoral school, following the scheme of doctoral consortia that are typically performed in the context of international conferences. This type of events should be further expanded and reinforced in a systematic way, since they bring together the disperse community of doctoral students and provide opportunities of peer review by colleagues, feedback by senior researchers, and consolidation of a collective identity.

The doctoral program should also benefit from a set of formative activities to be scheduled and delivered by faculty members, as well as by invited scholars. The department should take advantage of its national and international collaboration networks, the visitors in the frame of Erasmus agreements, or any other visiting academics in both the Department and School level. Moreover, it would be essential to promote transversal academic skills in terms of technical writing, presentations, as well as research methods.

The department should also address typical problems of the doctoral studies in similar Greek universities, such as the disconnection with the academic environment, the lack of research stays and participation in scientific events, or the proper funding so that doctoral students may become full-time researchers typically involved in major research projects.

B. Teaching

APPROACH:

Teaching Methods and Teacher/Student Collaboration

The EEC has based its evaluation on the following sources:

Interviews with faculty and students, incidental observation of two courses, students evaluations and the course descriptions.

The overall impression was that the faculty promoted a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. The students appeared willing to participate locally in discussion and to contribute to the lesson. In the discussion with the EEC students spoke positively of the relationships they have with the faculty, as well as their accessibility both face-to-face and through email. The EEC would like to acknowledge the motivation and commitment the

faculty exhibit in their relationship to students in the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level.

However it was evident that most courses are lecture-driven and a number of them seem not to regularly and systematically include a wide range of constructivist teaching approaches including collaborative learning, problem based activities, group work, experiential practice (e.g., hands-on activities, field trips), and approaches that cultivate higher order and critical thinking skills as well as metacognitive reflection. Further, students confirmed the impression of the EEC that in the lectures teaching follows frontal approach with limited opportunities of interaction between students and between students and the instructor. Both the faculty and students indicated that in many courses they are given the opportunity of interaction although this does not mean the systematic use of group projects, demonstrations, presentation of ideas, journaling and supplementary independent investigations/literature searches/reports. The high school education does not encourage this type of constructivist, student-centered approach which requires them to play an active role in the learning process. The EEC feels however that the students of high quality we met could manage the requirements of this approach.

Use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)

Our committee would also like to note the use of the University system e-class from a rather small number of faculty. E-class allows faculty members not only to distribute course syllabi, materials, PowerPoint presentations and other printed and audiovisual materials online, thereby making course materials and resources accessible to students at anytime, anyplace but also to interact with each other opening group work facilities and electronic submission of assignments. In the future, the Department might consider adding new dimensions to e-class, such as discussion forums and teaching (e.g. courses on research methods for graduate or PhD students) and evaluation procedures. The department might promote a better and systematic training of the faculty in the innovative and pedagogical use of the ICT.

Examination System

Most of courses are exclusively evaluated by one final exam. The examination procedures do not systematically use a wide range of assessment strategies that go beyond the standard end of the term examination. In practicum there are alternative ways of assessment (portofolio, journals).

Adequacy of Means and Resources Teaching staff/ student ratio

One of the greatest challenges noted by our committee is the teacher/student ratio, especially in field (or school-) experience. It became apparent that the faculty is under increased pressure to maintain teaching quality standards in recent years due to budget cuts that eliminated all limited term teaching personnel, and especially field experience supervisors (επόπτες).

The reasons lie beyond the control of the faculty. For example, every year the Ministry sets a number of students to be admitted into the program, which by far exceeds the number proposed by the department. Furthermore a rather big number of students is additionally transferred into the department through other legislated venues.

IMPLEMENTATION

Quality of Teaching and Adequacy of Course Materials

In the Department there are encouraging practices, especially in reporting and reflecting field practice activities. The EEC feels that the SED faculty should adopt constructivist oriented procedures when it comes to teaching. The quality of teaching procedures are not quite suitable for a department of education and are not grounded in recommended practices advocated in the research literature. Nevertheless, the adequacy of teaching materials is often challenging. In the current legislation, students are only allowed one free textbook for each course. This practice severely limits the SED faculty's literature recommendations. In some instances, two books are listed on the syllabus and students can choose one based on their interests.

Evidently absent is also the use of other contemporary digital technologies, such as mobile computer labs, tablets, Smartboards or other digital tools that support and facilitate student engagement and interaction. As an example, student response systems (i.e. clickers) widely used abroad in large lecture halls to engage students are not available anywhere. Further, besides the computer laboratory at the library there is no access to a Smartboard or to other digital tools. Certainly, there is a severe lack of appropriate resources, even in basic Internet connectivity in most classrooms.

Linking Research with Teaching

There is a strong emphasis in linking research and teaching – both among faculty and students. Faculty for example, typically engage in the study of their practice, or what we call scholarship of teaching, while students frequently use research techniques such as observation, journaling and action research during their practicum experiences in local school settings. In Masters level studies the link between Research and Teaching becomes

more efficient.

Mobility of Academic staff and Students

The SED participates in the Erasmus program having connections to a number of other European Universities. Despite that, mobility of academic staff is quite limited primarily due to financial constraints. Many members of the staff reported that they travel to congresses and conferences on private expenses.

At the student level, mobility levels are higher for outgoing students but not for incoming students (foreign students coming at the University of Thessaly). Again, financial and language barriers are the two larger inhibitors in student mobility.

Teaching Evaluations

Informal responses by students during the open-ended discussion with the EEC were highly positive. Besides that, there is a formal evaluation process administrated to students at the end of each course either in a hard copy or electronic format.

RESULTS

For the most part, students who register and get assessed in the SED courses are successful. The mean grade average of graduating students is high, following the trend in other pedagogical departments in Greece. The discrepancy between course failure and grades of graduation is an issue to be considered by the department.

Time to graduation also varies largely given the flexibility offered to students by the Greek legislation in the past. Nevertheless, most students graduate within a reasonable timeframe with the great majority of students graduating within the timeframe (time set+2) recommended by the new law.

IMPROVEMENT

The SED envisages improvement of teaching quality by adopting more student centred approaches. It would be good to integrate e-class procedures into both teaching and its evaluation. The department and the university try to find remedial solutions in order to ensure the quality of practicum supervision as the hiring of qualified personnel has become difficult due to severe budget cuts.

C. Research

APPROACH

The department has acknowledged the importance of a strong research agenda during its short life. The potential of the main field of the department, i.e. special or inclusive education, is especially high given its singularity in the national arena. On the other hand, it has promoted both basic and applied research, in close relation with the complementary facets of educational interventions and training. Finally, it has not limited its presence at the national level and aimed to maintain its connection to the international community through collaborations, publications and research initiatives.

A major channel promoted by the department consists of formal research laboratories. Although six research laboratories have been designed, documented and proposed to the State, only two of them (Child Neuropsychology; Psychology and Applications to Education) have been approved and established by the corresponding Ministry. On the contrary, approval for the rest of them (Natural Sciences; ICT in Education and Special Education; Sociological Analysis; and Learning Difficulties) is still pending for several years. Such delay hinders the proper development of the research potential of the department.

The research policy corresponds to the general practice of most Greek universities. The department is very active in producing research output and is increasingly raising funds from national and European programs.

However, as usual in humanities and social sciences, the research policy has neither been established explicitly and concretely at a strategic level, nor any standards for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of the research carried out by the department. The overall strategy should aim at the creation of strong research groups within the department, as well as with related departments at the University of Thessaly, defining properly the most promising niches and reinforcing the existing lines in a dynamic manner. It should also set up appropriate quality indicators and objectives (related e.g. to quality and quantity of projects and publications) to be achieved by the faculty members as well as the graduate students at the master's and doctorate levels. Also, the research policy should promote proper alignment and adequate support by the Research Committee of the University of Thessaly, especially in terms of leading significant competitive national and European projects in collaboration with relevant consortia.

IMPLEMENTATION

Research is promoted by the University of Thessaly through funding of a relevant number of limited scale projects and a small amount of fellowships for master level students. On the other hand, the recent significant cuts of public funding has already had a negative effect to the quantity and quality of infrastructure of the research laboratories and impeded proper involvement of the faculty members at international conferences. Finally, it is promising that the central Research Committee is planning to provide in short term proper support for the departmental research teams with respect to the complete lifecycle of the european projects, which are extremely challenging but indispensable at the same time.

The department has been active in all major research threads, especially through initiatives connected with educational interventions, counseling and training. On the other hand, it has been constantly increasing its presence in the scientific community establishing collaborations and producing publications. Most researchers are in the productive period of their scientific lives and therefore their production is expected to increase in the near future. However, further initiatives should be undertaken in order to motivate the less productive researchers and create a more balanced overall performance, while at the same time attract young and promising researchers who can lead new proposals.

RESULTS

The research activity and results of the department have been quite high, especially in the context of similar faculties in social sciences. The number and quality of research publications in journals is satisfactory as well as the participation in national and international conferences. It should be mentioned that funding for such interventions is often accomplished by the faculty members themselves or even worse by the doctoral students. A major effort should be made in order to promote participation and research stays, especially at the international level, through institutional funding or significant competitive research projects.

The department has participated in several research projects, although an excessive percentage of them corresponds to the internal low competitive and funded research programs of the University of Thessaly. Also, it has been especially active in important national projects supported by European funds, that are related to concrete educational interventions and training. The results could be better in terms of participating and especially leading projects within the major national and European programmes (e.g. the previous Thalys and Aristeia or Life Long Learning and Framework programmes). The department should aim to take advantage of its profile and align it to the special importance of Inclusion

and similar Social Challenges in the upcoming Horizon 2020 and Erasmus Plus programs. The increased participation in these significant research programs could be based on the existing collaboration among research institutions, as it can be evidenced by the important participation of individual researchers in projects led by other departments or universities.

Visibility of the research activities and results is restricted to specific mini-conferences or workshops that are organized regularly by the department and scientific publications. The website information, especially in English, can be overall enriched. Additionally, visibility at the international level should be reinforced through the already established social networks, and a major presence at the international events, although current strong funding reductions strongly limit such initiatives.

In spite of the few years of existence of the department and the reduction of funding and personnel, the scientific community has acknowledged the quality of research undertaken (see evidence of a significant number of external citations to its publications).

IMPROVEMENT

Besides the aforementioned improvement actions the Department should include systematic measures in order to monitor and further support the work of the doctoral students, one of the most important pillars of research. Also, it should aim at the integration of postdoctoral researchers within the research groups through the support of significant research projects or special funding schemes, such as Marie Curie.

D. All Other Services

APPROACH

The Department's administrative services are efficient and serve the needs of the students. Sometimes, however, things are very bureaucratic and complicated.

Electronic processing of procedures is used for student enrolment, but most of the administrative tasks could be performed electronically.

The University does not have a policy to increase student presence on Campus. Actually in some cases if all students registered in certain courses attend the class, the room would be too small to accommodate them.

IMPLEMENTATION

Organization

The administrative staff is situated in the same building with the faculty. It seems that administration operates in a functional way.

Infrastructure

- Library. The EEC visited the central library of the University. The building and study rooms of the library are decent. The book and journal (hard copies) collection is poor and there are very few recent books. The electronic data bases and e-journals are at a very good level.
- Study Halls. A number of small educational study rooms exist in the library which is located 2km away from the department. There are no study halls in the University building.
- Digital Tools/Internet. Access to computers and other digital technologies is severely deficient. Besides the computer lab, which is used for instructional purposes, students have access only to a small number of computers in the library. There is wireless internet connection in the building but it's not very fast. More recently, the department has started to make use of the e-class platform, which allows students to access materials, Powerpoint presentations and to engage in online discussions. The use of e-class could be used more widely used when the number of students does not allow personal tutor-student contact.
- Facilities. The number of lecture halls is not adequate. Lecture halls are organised for traditional teaching (in most halls chairs are nailed on the floor). Therefore there is no availability of problem-based learning classrooms or other "smart" classrooms that can facilitate group work and student interaction.
- Infrastructure. The building infrastructure is acceptable but for sure not modern. The faculty offices are satisfactory and well equipped.
- Peer Counselling Group. The Department has a counselling laboratory that offers advising to students. The laboratory appears to be quite efficient and serves a quite big number of students as well as the general public.

RESULTS

To date, administrative services have been adequate and functional. The responsibilities of administrative staff were clearly delineated and distributed among the secretarial staff. There was good morale and a willingness to work above and beyond regular work hours to get the job done. The EEC and the Department expresses serious concerns about the future, as drastic reduction of administrative personnel is under way due to the new legislation.

IMPROVEMENTS

The University uses funding from research programs and fees from graduate programmes to meet acute administrative needs.

Collaboration with social, cultural and production organizations

A Department like SED is asked to play a dual role within the University of Thessaly, the community of Volos (and the wider area of Thessaly) and Greece in general. The SED is the only department in Greece that prepares special education teachers. Therefore, the Department needs to prepare the next generation of highly-qualified special educators. Second, the Department must help current educators and those working within special education settings to advance their professional knowledge and skills and utilize theory-driven practices and instructional materials in a variety of special education, family and community settings. This latter role sets the stage for a wide range of collaborations with a variety of special education, psychology, counselling and family organizations including among others: general and special schools, counselling units, organizations that serve people with disabilities (blind, deaf, etc.), rehabilitation centres to name a few. The nature of the collaboration varies but often involves assistance in program development, instructional material development, evaluations of children with disabilities, presentations from faculty, counselling services (without pay), and in some instances SED student volunteers. Without doubt the Department serves an important role in community involvement and contributes greatly to the society as a whole.

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

Departments of Greek Universities are not familiar with strategic planning. The current process of internal and external evaluation and the expectation of accreditation is an opportunity for SED to rethink its priorities and develop a vision and a strategy. The attitude of the faculty is more than positive in this respect.

SED is the only Department of Special Education in Greece and aims at the consolidation of their identity and maximization of their comparative advantages, especially the experience and the existing networks in Greece and abroad.

It appears that there is a tension between two schools of thought concerning Special Education. The SED, although partly rooted in the tradition of a psychological/medical model of approaching special education, is currently trying to move towards a more inclusive model. Although the development of almost every university department in Greece becomes problematic due to the present financial crisis and the associated budget cuts (and it is also to be noted that minorities are more vulnerable in situations of crisis), funding for research and educational programs can be attracting from European sources following the priority of the EU for individuals with special needs (European strategy 2020).

At University level the SED is positively disposed towards a more systematic collaboration with other Departments of Education within the School.

F. Final Conclusions and recommendations of the EEC

Recommendations

The EEC would like to express its gratitude to the SED faculty for their cooperation, honesty, professionalism and hospitality. The evaluation was conducted within a climate of outmost respect and collegiality.

The EEC recommends the following:

Curriculum/Teaching

- Academic advisors should be actively involved in guiding students in selecting their courses and dealing more effectively with the demands of each course. In addition they should follow their advisees throughout their studies.
- Structure the program of study by semester in such a way that becomes evident which courses are prerequisite to others.
- A PhD program of studies should be developed that is characterized by a clear

philosophy of PhD studies with goals, procedures and methods of evaluation.

- Monitoring and more systematic use of evaluation data for the revision of the department's policies.
- Development and use of more student centred approaches to teaching. Relying primarily on traditional, teacher-centered approaches the faculty do not seem in most cases to model in the lectures the kinds of teaching practices they expect their graduates to use.
- The faculties of SED need professional development of the pedagogical uses of ICT.
- More systematic use of ICT in teaching. Furthermore, the use of e-learning platform for teaching certain courses (perhaps graduate or PhD courses) will help the department to overcome many factors that act as barriers to its further development.

Research

- The EEC strongly encourages the SED faculty to continue applying for funding, particularly as coordinators in large-scale projects.
- The Department can benefit from a more organized Alumni Association. The SED should increase the connections with doctoral students. It should also intensify the existing network between the PhD graduates and supervisors.