



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

Α.ΔΙ.Π.

ΑΡΧΗ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ & ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ
ΤΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΝΩΤΑΤΗ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ

HELLENIC REPUBLIC

H.Q.A.

HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE
AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

DEPARTMENT of Primary Education

UNIVERSITY of Thessaly



European Union
European Social Fund



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, CULTURE & SPORTS
M A N A G I N G A U T H O R I T Y

Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



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 Primary Education of the University of Thessaly consisted of the following three (3) expert evaluators drawn from the Registry constituted by the HQA in accordance with Law 3374/2005 :

1. Professor Panagiotis Metaxas (Coordinator)
Department of Computer Science; Program in Media Arts and Sciences, Wellesley College, USA

2. Professor Michael Tsianikas
Department of Modern Greek Studies, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

3. Assoc. Professor Gina Ioannitou
Department of Didactics of Languages, Université du Maine, Le Mans,, France

N.B. The structure of the “Template” proposed for the External Evaluation Report mirrors the requirements of Law 3374/2005 and corresponds overall to the structure of the Internal Evaluation Report submitted by the Department.

The length of text in each box is free. Questions included in each box are not exclusive nor should they always be answered separately; they are meant to provide a general outline of matters that should be addressed by the Committee when formulating its comments.

Introduction

I. The External Evaluation Procedure

The External Evaluation Committee (EEC) met in Athens on Monday, December 16, 2013 and travelled to Volos, Thessaly in a van provided by the University. They were welcomed by members of the Department of Primary Education (DPE) at the hotel and then visited the Associate Dean for Student Affairs at the Dean’s Office. Shortly after they were joined by 14 members of the DPE for a first introduction of each member’s teaching and research interests, as well as the representative of the administrative and laboratory personnel. Of the 18 members of the faculty, 4 were not present: Two are on sabbatical abroad, one was on medical leave, and one had chosen not to participate in the evaluation. We remark that one member on sabbatical and one on medical leave were among the 18 participating. The meetings continued in the next day and a half following, as much as possible, the program that the department had prepared.

On Tuesday, December 17, the EEC had a sequence of discussions with all members of the department on curricular issues of both the undergraduate and graduate programs, and visited faculty offices in the two locations used by the DPE, and the administration office. The department had prepared and posted on its web site all presentation material (<http://www.pre.uth.gr/new/el/yliko-axiologisis>) that was used during these discussions.

Members of the EEC met privately with individual faculty members exchanging confidential views of the conditions of the department and the faculty’s visions for the future. In addition to these discussions, the EEC provided for a confidential way to receive responses to the following four questions from any faculty member who would like to respond:

- “What would you like to improve in the curriculum?”
- “How does your curriculum compare to those of other DPEs?”
- “What would you like to improve in the way research is conducted?”
- “How does your research compare to that of other DPEs?”

The EEC also met privately with two groups of undergraduate students who responded to the department’s call for input, and of students who happened to attend two Physics laboratory classes. They also met with groups of graduate students and graduates of the two Masters of Arts (MA) programs who also responded to the call for meetings.

The second day concluded with a visit at the Centre for Didactic Support and

Documentation (KE.Δ.Y.K.E.T.) at the “Thessaly” building that is a few blocks away from the main building. During both days, members of the EEC visited and were given presentations at the research labs of “Mathematics Education and Didactics of Natural Sciences”, “Study, Education and Promotion of the Greek Language” and “Educational History”. The EEC also visited the research lab of “Educational Technologies and Development of Educational Software” but not the Computer Room at the main building that was closed because no class was taking place. They also visited the administration office and a local school where they observed groups of student-teachers who were teaching in two different classes.

All the meetings with faculty, personnel and students were conducted in a cordial, professional and sincere atmosphere, with mutual respect and open mind-ness. The only exception was a meeting with a small group of 4 students who declared upon entering that, while they had no personal objection against the members of the EEC, they were opposed to its method of formation and therefore its presence on campus.

II. The Internal Evaluation Procedure

Before, during and after the visit, the EEC examined a large collection of documents prepared promptly and eagerly by the department. In addition to the presentation materials mentioned above, the EEC examined the information on the web site of the department including the description of the faculty research interests and publications (<http://www.pre.uth.gr/new/el/faculty-el>), the internal evaluation report of the department (IER), a collection of 17 short curriculum vitae of the faculty, samples of books and publications of the current and prior faculty, samples of PhD, MA and undergraduate (“diploma”) theses, portfolios and reports of practicum, samples of final exams, undergraduate student projects within the school teaching practice, a list of publications of faculty (2009—2012), a list of PhD theses (2009—2012), a list of PhD candidates (2011—2012), lists of graduate theses, internal guides of operation for the two graduate programs, guide of operations for the PhD program, the guide of undergraduate studies, information about the department’s relations to the region, the 2009 Code of University Ethics and the 2008—2011 Internal Evaluation Report of the University of Thessaly.

The collection of documents examined by the EEC is considered sufficient in providing a comprehensive assessment of most of the program. The missing portion is, understandably, due to the lack of collaboration by one faculty member. A closer examination of the member’s self-reported list of publication on the web site includes a single journal publication in the last 10 years. If this is correct, it may not affect significantly the overall assessment of the department’s research output in the period studied (2009—2012).

A. Curriculum

To be filled separately for each undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programme.

According to the internal evaluation report and the 2012-2013 program of study, the goals and objectives of the curriculum (undergraduate and postgraduate) are:

- Systematically address the main teaching objectives in order to prepare teachers ready to respond to major teaching challenges of our times including appropriate and sufficient knowledge, teaching flexibility, equity and democratic ethos within the school community;
- Development of new ways of teaching, assessing and evaluating all teaching practices, including e-learning;
- Systematically support postgraduates students in their research endeavors and in particular to inform/support them to participate in various scientific forums and produce high quality publications;
- Ongoing professional engagement for the teaching community and creating new learning opportunities for the society as a whole.

Structure of Curriculum

a) Undergraduate: Four years of studies of 52 courses, total 240 ECTS:

- 35 compulsory courses
- 13 “compulsory electives” courses
- 4 foreign language courses

Also students should complete 4 levels of School Teaching Practice, included in the 35 compulsory courses in the last four semesters.

It is also important to mention that following a selective process some students choose to produce an undergraduate thesis instead of one of the 52 courses (4,5 ECTS).

b) Post graduate: (i) without fees and (ii) with fees: students should successfully complete a number of courses and produce a thesis of approximately 50 to 60 thousand words.

c) Doctoral program: based only on one thesis of approximately 80 thousand words.

All objectives of the curriculum are decided by the General Assembly of the Department, where, according the Code of the University’s Ethics (2009), the participation of all staff is compulsory.

According to IER the main focus of the curriculum is to:

- Be coherent as a whole
- Begin with the teaching of a solid framework of essential areas of knowledge (e.g.: language, mathematics, history, teaching methodology, sciences of teaching, in particular for 1st and 2nd year)
- Explore more practical ways of learning/teaching (in particular for 3rd and 4th year)
- Develop research skills for all students in order to make sure that teachers are ready to revise their teaching practices in the future

- Promote research policies and practices for postgraduate and doctorate students to excel in an area of research

In the recent past the department went through two revisions of the curriculum:

- 2004-2005, termed a “radical revision”, and
- 2011-2012

As a result of these revisions the department decided to reduce number of courses and, as a result of the reduction, to increase the value of credit points for each course from 3 to 4.5. Staff members said that the department is continually discussing all aspect of the curriculum, taking into consideration national and international universities’ curricula, student’s feedback and societal changes, including the current financial crisis of Greece.

Generally speaking Department’s goals are implemented effectively. There is a systematic effort to combine theoretical/practical teaching methods and upgrade research methods and outcomes:

- Teaching: Although the program is coherent and effective there is urgent need to: a) rethink ways of informing students at the beginning of their studies about the philosophy and delivery of curriculum by producing a more comprehensive “Guide of Studies”, including better assessment methods and procedures according to international standards; b) rethink the number of teaching hours to make sure that Curriculum is effectively delivered; c) rethink the fact that many courses are delivered through long 3-hours lecture blocks; d) rethink assessment methods, in particular for courses assessed by a single final examination. This is against University’s official Code of Ethics, p.18 and could be legally challenged by any student.
All of the points made above were strongly confirmed by students.
- Teaching Laboratories: Some laboratories are working exceptionally well and their curriculum was clear, dynamic and effective. This was evident by presentations, scope of philosophy, program delivery, student enthusiasm and vision for the future. Other laboratories should reconsider their ways of engaging students and producing more dynamic outcomes.
- Practicum: Generally speaking all people involved (students, teachers and schools) were happy with the way that Practicum is conducted and commented that this is one of the most visible and valuable part of the curriculum.

Post graduate/doctorate: Again, students and teachers involved were very positive about these programs.

While the Evaluation Committee understands that there are serious obstacles influencing current and future working conditions within the department due to the current financial crisis of the Greek State, there are ways of improving the department’s curriculum. There were lengthy discussions with a great number of staff regarding curricular improvements and all expressed strong interest to continue discussing and improving the curriculum. In particular:

- Avoid all sort of overlapping(s)

- Following a common philosophy/practice of delivering and assessing
- Develop a stronger culture of student-focused curriculum

The EEC also recommends that it is urgent to introduce e-learning procedures for all lecture-based courses and all levels. It was evident that some staff members are more aware of the potential of e-learning and already employ parts of it, while others are mostly using the “old” system and a few are not using e-learning at all. The committee believes that the department should find ways to study critically and in some depth the opportunities of e-learning, support this potentially crucial domain that can provide solutions to some of the current problems (such as the many hours of teaching, staff and students commuting schedules to Volos, competitive learning environments, etc.). Some provision should be taken by the University to support such efforts because it would be impossible for the single technical support member of staff, who is doing an outstanding job, to be able to implement a more ambitious plan for the future. The EEC believes that it is important to promote online learning and recommends increasing the members of staff supporting information technologies.

B. Teaching

The department, in general, has done a lot of work to improve the academic teaching policies and offer to students a teaching approach that corresponds to the demands of modern times and the new social qualification request of teachers in Greece. Undergraduate modules are delivered in the following three ways: as lecture modules (including large, introductory modules), as “laboratories” and as “seminars” for the school teaching practice.

Various methods of teaching are used including lectures, discussions, projects, interactive workshops, micro-teaching, clickers, humour teaching, differential teaching, good practice teaching, Skype, body language, analysis of a specific problem etc. This variety of methodology appears to cover learning objectives in all domains and is appreciated by the students. Students, however, mentioned that lectures are the main delivery method in compulsory courses (due to the large number of students attending) than optional courses, where all the other methods are used.

All courses are assessed mainly by a written examination at the end of each course, but also individual and teamwork, production of educational material, presentations of different subjects, etc. The EEC concluded – after discussion with the faculty and the students and after reading sample exams papers– that exam questions often are focused on recalling information, rather than critically evaluating the acquired knowledge. This should definitely be addressed in the future.

Postgraduate modules are taught in all of the ways mentioned in the undergraduate program [see above].

A very positive point is the provision that students with special needs can be examined not only through written exams but also through alternative procedures, such as oral examination, Braille system, etc. Faculty and students also assist those students with learning and social disabilities. A faculty member is responsible for addressing their needs and students are appointed as mentors for helping them during the courses.

Teacher/students collaboration seems to be present all year long. Students and graduates affirmed the willingness of faculty and staff to support them. They also wished – mostly during the first two years of study – for more information.

According to the IER, the faculty/student ratio in 2011-12 was a depressing 1/47. When other academic personnel are included in the calculation, this ratio fell to a more reasonable 1/29. And according to the official data given by the HQA, in 2012-13 the number of students enrolled was 635 with 18 faculty and 2 other academic staff, resulting in a faculty/student ratio of 1/35 and 1/31 accordingly. There is no doubt in the minds of the EEC that this ratio should continue to improve in favour of the students.

Overall, the department functions well under difficult conditions. The teaching rooms available to the department are not enough for instruction and the department competed for two auditoria shared between 4 departments. As a result, faculty is scheduling courses well into the evening (9PM). The EEC believes that more teaching rooms must be given to the department in order to improve the teaching conditions.

Students have access to internet through the campus. They also have access to international papers and journal through database. However, the office of computers (KE.Δ.Y.K.E.T.) – with five computers – seemed not to be used as much as it could. In discussion with some students and staff, most of the students reported to own a computer. This may be inaccurate, however, as it is likely that students who may not afford to own a computer are unlikely to come forth. The University (preferably, or the department) should create a questionnaire at entry time to determine the percentage of incoming students without computers.

While students reported to be satisfied by the current teaching procedures, many remarked that they prefer interactive courses rather than lectures. They also mentioned the limited number (one) of courses on learning disabilities in order to be better prepared for their profession, and asked for a course on literacy, an area that is currently partially covered by two other courses.

Research laboratories that link research and teaching also support teaching. One of them has its own room; the rest are hosted in the office of a faculty member. All seem well equipped. The responsible faculty member of the laboratory invests a lot of time in equipping them and is usually assisted by undergraduate and postgraduate students in his/her work.

The EEC read samples of undergraduate theses. The quality of inquiry in these theses reflects positively on the quality of the teaching and the degree of critical thinking that those students develop during their studies.

The department presented results on student satisfaction with courses and teaching methods. They acknowledge that the results were not representative of the overall

population's opinion – only few students responded to it. The EEC remarked that the questionnaire given is too long and may be discouraging to those students willing to complete it, and recommends the introduction of a shorter questionnaire with few some open questions would give more valid results teaching and could be answered by more students.

The EEC was impressed by the quality of the school teaching practice. It starts at year three and is divided in four courses taking place from semester 5 to semester 8. These courses have a theoretical and practical aspect. The faculty member teaching the course supervises the students in the school teaching practice, which takes place in different schools of the district. Schools are also sometimes included in research program directed by the department. A good collaboration exists between faculty members, school directors, teachers and students in order to ensure a successful school teaching practice.

The EEC examined sample portfolios and reports of the students and was impressed by the quality of them. The EEC also visited a school and observed two teaching practices, finding the methods of teaching used by the faculty very satisfactory. The faculty encourage their students to use a variety of teaching methods in class.

In addition to the school teaching practice that is compulsory in the curriculum for undergraduate students, an optional paid practicum also exists for an additional up to two months per student. In this practicum students help children in class with special needs and learning disabilities. This paid practicum is funded by an ESPA grant through 2015. All members of the department and students expressed a desire that this program continue beyond 2015.

Further evidence of the devotion of the faculty to the school teaching practice is the fact those involved visit the schools and observe their students approximately 1- 2 hours per week outside their normal service hours without being paid overtime.

The Department participates in the Erasmus program, which allows students to study in universities outside Greece. Faculty find that the number of outgoing students is not satisfactory. One reason is high competition in terms of language popularity: students request English-speaking countries more than German or French speaking ones. Exchange of professors is also very low (according to the internal report, only one outgoing and one incoming faculty member participated in the year 2011-12). The aim of the department is to increase the outgoing students to 20% (from less than 10% today). In order to do so, they have signed new Erasmus contracts, effective next year, with Durham and Liverpool (England), Charles (Prague). The EEC recommends that all new collaborations with Universities should focus not only in exchange of students and faculty but also in research collaborations between institutions involved. The small number of incoming students is mainly due to the lack of knowledge of the Greek language. This is a difficulty that the staff tries to address by creating a new module in English. The EEC finds that is a very positive and commendable initiative.

There is no doubt that both undergraduate and graduate teaching in the department shows signs of excellence and this is appreciated by the students. In regard to the student learning outcomes for the year 2011-12 the average of students' grades was 7,78. This might be regarded as an indicator of teaching effectiveness. It could also be seen as an indicator that the faculty could increase their expectations from students.

The minimum time requested for undergraduate studies is four years. A large number of students continue their studies after four years. The year 2011-12 the number of students graduated has increased to 194 (compared to 110 in the year 2010-11). Cleaning the records of very long term students who apparently have given up on their studies would increase the ability of the department to allocate their resources effectively.

In terms of improvement, the EEC agrees with many of the suggestions included in the IER, in particular the ones related to

- (i) Division of large classes into smaller sections as appropriate,
- (ii) Investigating of lifelong learning by school teachers, and
- (iii) Encouragement of PhD and Postgraduate students to organize and attend departmental, national and international research seminars and lectures as a core part of their program.

C. Research

For each particular matter, please distinguish between under- and post-graduate levels, if necessary.

In terms of research, the department supports two MA programs and a PhD program. Since May 2012 the IRD lists a newly approved Post-doc program that has not started yet. The main objective of the overall research program is listed in the internal evaluation report as “related to the improvement of the educational practicum but also to wider interesting issues in Education”. While this objective may not be as focused as it could be, the two graduate programs describe better the current focus of the department’s research directions. According to them, one main research objective is the development of leadership and organizational principles that will promote the innovative research in the Greek and international educational environments. The other main objective is the development of constructive educational approaches, collaborative learning practices and the incorporation of new technologies in the educational process.

Like in most Greek Universities, the internal standards of quality are imposed and enforced in a distributed manner. For MA and PhD theses, the standards are defined and observed by small internal committees constituted for this reason. Given that the graduate programs in Greece are ruled by governmental general guidelines, and that individual Universities do not attempt to formulate specific research standards and directions, the performance of the DPE in this area is typical of a Greek University. Nevertheless, the EEC encourages the development of more detailed descriptions of research directions and standards in the future.

Through the two MA programs the department promotes and supports research in the areas mentioned. External support comes primarily from the many research grants that faculty members obtain. The University’s support is rather limited and includes mainly some basic infrastructure and basic utilities. The quality of the infrastructure leaves a lot to be desired. Almost all of the research laboratories are housed inside a professor’s office where also desks for 1-2 PhD students are placed. The lack of whiteboards makes

these areas look more like professional offices. This is definitely an unacceptable situation as it does not offer space for contemplation, brainstorming and experimentation of individual researchers. More office and research space should be provided so that it enables PhD students to work inside the department's facilities without distractions.

As mentioned, the efforts and successes in obtaining European and national grants by faculty is commendable and has resulted in producing a large number of publications, research projects and collaborations with other researchers across Europe. For example, the production of refereed journal publications in the period examined, is considered rather positive, compared to the current size of the department. The majority of such publications are in languages other than Greek, offering the possibility of greater visibility of the department's research output. While this is understandable due to the fact that part of the DPE's research is related to the use and study of the Modern Greek Language, an increased ratio of international journals would reflect better on the department and allow for stronger international presence.

In terms of citations, the numbers reported in the internal evaluation report are typical or better compared to other IERs from Greek departments of Education. Yet, they may not reflect the full potential for visibility, as most of the faculty articles and book chapters are behind publisher pay walls or in venues that do not actively promote easy retrieval through search engines of their collections. A random web search on a few titles of PhD theses, for example, did not locate the original publication online, and it is unlikely that something that is not easily located will be cited. The EEC recommends the adaptation by the University of Thessaly of an Open Access Policy that would allow the retention of non-commercial copyrights by the University of the faculty authors' scholarly work. This should also be supported by the establishment of a digital repository of faculty and student publications that would provide retrieval to other researchers and indexing to search engines. Examples of successful such initiatives can be found at <https://bit.ly/Wellesley-Open-Access> and elsewhere.

The EEC noticed that there are uneven graduating rates between the two postgraduate programs: the "Organization and Management of Education" program has a high percentage of graduating students, while the "Contemporary Learning Environments and Production of Didactic Material" presents gaps of graduation rates. It is not clear what causes this uneven-ness, but it could be that a program that is free of any fees, including small semester enrolment fees, results in inaccurate counting of continuing students and thus a lower percentage of graduate students.

The EEC also believes that the department must clarify the status of very long-term PhD students (13 have started before 2007 and as early as 1998). Again for this problem we recommend the introduction of small semester enrolment fees so that the department has a realistic view of its PhD program. It seems that the official procedure to remove an inactive PhD student from the catalogues is not functioning. We recommend that this procedure should change. Further, some clarification of what constitutes successful progress towards a PhD (in terms of papers submitted and accepted, conference participation, journal reviews, etc.) is needed.

D. All Other Services

For each particular matter, please distinguish between under- and post-graduate levels, if necessary.

Buildings/ Campus

The Department's headquarters is located in a nice building with excellent sea views close to the center of the town of Volos. The secondary building is not attractive and is located in a noisy part of town but there is no obvious suggestion to improve the situation. At least the distance between the two buildings is not great. Existing classroom and staff office sizes are excellent but for the size of the department more spaces are needed, as listed in the IER. Students are also complaining about the lack of adequate spaces.

Technical services and e-learning

Access and use to ICT, Educational and Research Laboratory is not always very easy because of lack of professional staff and out-dated equipment. Postgraduate students are enjoying more access comparing to undergraduates. Technologies of information and communication are used:

- in various laboratories
- some times for teaching purposes
- as a mean of communication between staff, students and administration
- for research.

It was not obvious that all teaching staff have their own updated web site. The committee recommends that faculty is supported so that they can create and maintain one.

There are 3 members of admin staff. One member is acting as Secretary, and the other two are serving the needs of students and faculty members: receiving students, keeping student records, issuing certificates for studies, distributing books, managing financial matters of the Department, managing the website of the Department, organizing general meetings and many more. All 3 confirmed that they are covering the existing administrative needs but they are fearing that by losing one of their colleagues (they said that one position is under immediate threat) it is going to be impossible to deliver all services required. Over the last few years there was an improvement in delivering more effectively various admin services by using online procedures. This was confirmed by everybody. However some students believe that a) it will be more useful to deliver more online services to avoid delays and frustrations and b) to encourage that admin staff is more friendly with students.

It is also important to support admin staff with opportunities regarding ongoing professional development, develop leadership skills and professional advancement based on merit rather than year of services. It is equally important for the departments, in discussion with other departments and the University as a whole, to rethink more creative and productive ways to deliver better common services by saving time and energy.

Collaboration with social, cultural and production organizations

Community

The department is developing a high quality and intensive network with educational services, institutional organizations and the wider community.

According to IER there is a strong evidence of community engagement in:

- Developing strong relationship with social, educational and professional institutions
- Organizing public events (talks, seminars, debates, conferences) to promote cultural awareness about history, literature, popular tradition (in many occasions focusing on local themes)
- Promoting awareness and public debates about issues regarding people/social groups in need (e.g: migrants, Roma, etc)
- Offering ongoing professional development for teachers and schools

The department believes that there is room for improvement in order to create a more vibrant collaboration with the community and promote it in more systematic way. In that way the Department will be able to achieve better recognition and in the process a) create new teaching and research opportunities b) establish strong alliance with new community groups in creating new opportunities and further development in the future and c) develop potential partnerships in order to apply for various linkage grants in the future.

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

For each particular matter, please distinguish between under- and post-graduate levels, if necessary.

Please, comment on the Department's:

- Potential inhibiting factors at State, Institutional and Departmental level, and proposals on ways to overcome them.
- Short-, medium- and long-term goals.
- Plan and actions for improvement by the Department/Academic Unit
- Long-term actions proposed by the Department.

The strategic planning of the department as stated in the internal report (pages 76 – 80) mainly focuses in each of the four academic areas: curriculum, teaching research and social presence. It also includes potential inhibiting factors at all levels and ways of dealing with them. Not surprisingly, the strategic plan of the department appears to be in line with the strategic plan of the University (page 27 – 29) according to the internal evaluation report of the University. Given the considerable uncertainty and severe budgetary problems that permeate all Greek Universities (and the Greek State that is providing major funding) it is quite impressive that the University of Thessaly is holding its ground and is able to serve its students when other Universities fail.

The EEC found that, in general, the Department has been focusing on keeping its operations going and on developing a solid long-term strategic vision. For this reason, the EEC feels that the Department should proceed with its planning process and should not wait until a clearer budgetary scenario emerges. And here falls a major responsibility on the University officers, since the strategic plan of one Department cannot be isolated from the overall strategy of the institution.

The most important inhibiting factors that the EEC considers are:

At state level:

- Limited educational funding
- Lack of adequate research funding
- Delays in appointing faculty and staff

At institutional level:

- Limited infrastructure
- Limits in both inter-departmental courses and collaboration
- Limited staff in some domains (esp. information technologies, administration)

At departmental level:

- Limited international educational and research exchange opportunities
- Lack of formal, long-term research plans between members of the department and/or members of other departments of Education.
- Limited use and planning for e-learning opportunities

The EEC, during the visit and following the presentations and discussions with the faculty, appreciated the strong elements of the department in its strategic plan which are the following:

- Focus on a more conceptual pedagogical/educational framework on which to anchor the curriculum, teaching and research program.
- Connection between the undergraduate and postgraduate departments with research seminars and the participation of postgraduate students as mentors.
- Collaboration with other Education departments of the University of Thessaly for the first two years of studies in major courses.
- Collaboration with other Education departments in Greek Universities for the development of a more-or-less common core curriculum.
- Incorporation of e-learning and lifelong learning for students and teachers.
- Development of stronger international educational and research exchange opportunities and a higher presence of faculty in the international scene
- Greater awareness of students concerning their social role and implementation in the society.

In the next section, the EEC provides some recommendations that may help with the growth and health of the department in the next decade.

F. Final Conclusions and recommendations of the EEC

For each particular matter, please distinguish between under- and post-graduate levels, if necessary.

In the 25 years since graduating its first students the department has accomplished many objectives.

- The department has attracted hard-working, conscious, talented, knowledgeable faculty members that truly devote themselves to the education of good teachers and commit their time without reservation so that their students are exposed to a impressively wide range of educational areas. **This accomplishment is not to be underestimated.** In fact, the EEC believes that the faculty we met is by far the greatest strength of this department and the best guarantee that it will emerge stronger out of the crisis in the Greek State Universities.
- Related to the point above, a collegial environment has emerged that allows for smooth day to day operation. As evidence, we note the thoughtful and thorough collection of **improvement plans adopted by the faculty** in section 10 of the internal evaluation report. Moreover, during our open and private discussions we found great support for the recommendations discussed later in this section.
- With their graduate studies they support two highly sought-after MA programs and have created national awareness of their programs. These programs enable the research initiatives of the faculty members and provide educated, intelligent and devoted researchers.
- They have developed a research program that has produced a number of PhD theses that support the research agendas of the faculty.
- There are several competitive advantages that the department has over other Education Departments in Greece. Among them we point to the organization of the **Practicum** in its various forms (basic, widen and voluntary) and the research efforts focusing on **local communities** (school research networks, programs for minorities and especially Roma).
- Community-based initiatives are very strong and promising. Further explore more possibilities to engage with the community, disseminate the results of their collaboration and explore further possibilities with the private sector.

As often is the case, there are a few areas where the department's performance could improve if enough attention is given. While more funding will be needed for some of them, several of our recommendations can be implemented without extra funding or increased workload.

- The collection of courses offered appears to be well aligned with the educational objectives of the department. While it is commendable that faculty is trying to offer a great variety of courses so that they cover the educational needs of most students, the fact that more than 50 courses are required for graduation is counterproductive. Currently, the student workload is 7 courses per semester in the first two years of study, 6 in the last two. By comparison, the number of courses typically required in any undergraduate degree in most Universities around the world does not exceed 4-5 per semester or 40 courses per 4-year degree. Less can be qualitatively more. Fewer courses would allow for more time during the week devoted to reflection, self-

guidance and development of maturity by the students at this developmental age.

We recommend that the faculty consider reducing the number of courses offered by at least two per semester, while increasing the depth in each of them. This can be accomplished by combining related courses, especially in the core curriculum.

- At the same time, some of the courses offered in the program seem to follow rather closely the educational backgrounds of the faculty rather than the needs of a scrutinized curriculum. This, of course, is a curious characteristic of many departments in Greece. The EEC understands that, historically, this has been an accepted if unfortunate trend. However, this tradition has detrimental effects on the evolution of a curriculum and does not allow for flexibility in the responsiveness of the curriculum to newer educational directions. Moreover, the fact only a minority of courses is categorized as “electives” creates inflexibility in student efforts to obtain deeper expertise. **We recommend that the department consider offering a smaller number of core but more substantial courses, not to exceed one third of the total required for graduation, and a larger number of electives that will give flexibility to the curriculum.**
- The number of students enrolled every year in the department is determined by the State, and stretches the limited resources in terms of faculty and infrastructure of the department. Lectures with well above 30 students do not encourage discussion and inquiry in the classroom. A department that does not have control on the number and quality of its incoming students faces an uphill battle in maintaining program quality, and for this reason the best Universities in the world have very strict admissions policies. **We recommend that the State accept the recommendations of the department in terms of numbers and minimum scores of enrolling students, thus taking full responsibility of its program and enabling it to achieve its educational goals. If that is not done, the department should be given the opportunity to hire more faculty and allocate more appropriately equipped lecture rooms to address the bloated number of new enrolments.**
- The University of Thessaly houses three departments specializing in Education: the departments of Primary, Pre-school and Special Education. As expected, due to the similarity of their subjects, many of the introductory courses are overlapping. There is a great opportunity to enhance both the educational and research output of these three departments by fostering closer collaboration between them. One way to do that is in planning their introductory offerings during (at least) the first two years of studies. Such collaboration can use resources more efficiently, increasing the flexibility in students’ schedules since introductory courses could be taught every semester. As a side effect, it will enable and strengthen collaborative research projects by members across departments. Finally, such collaborations would be in line with international practices. **We recommend that the departments of Primary Education, Pre-School Education and Special education create a formal procedure of discussion and adopt common course offerings for at least the introductory courses in first two years of their programs.**
- While the faculty has had a lot of successes in getting European and national grants, there are many more opportunities that are missed due to lack of information by the interested faculty and the overhead in applying and managing a grant. **We recommend the internal development or external hiring of a “grant officer”, a local administrative expert at the University level who would monitor grant opportunities and inform faculty members with expertise**

in the field. A grant officer would develop expertise in helping prepare the required non-creative parts of a proposal (such as the budget and supporting material) and monitor the spending of the grant, thus freeing faculty members of the considerable time demands in turning ideas into grants.

- Related to the above, good ideas can come from every faculty member, including junior faculty. In fact, the majority of grant proposals abroad are coming from junior faculty who join a department full of energy and new ideas. Enabling excited, creative and energetic junior faculty members to submit grant proposals will increase the number of competitive proposals submitted and, eventually, the number of grants awarded. **We recommend the adjustment of the relevant legislation in order to enable junior faculty submit grant proposals.**
- There is a clear need for increased student feedback for each course. While faculty has been trying hard to do so, the length and generic nature of the State-sponsored questionnaire that is currently used is not helping. **We recommend that technology should be used to allow reduction in the number of questions so that they apply to the course and allow for few important free text answers** such as “Describe own effort in the course”, “Would you recommend the elective course to others with similar background” and “Would you recommend the instructor to others”. Some incentives for the students to complete these questionnaires (e.g., by allowing those who completed it to access their course grade online immediately, instead of a week later) could also help the rate or response.
- The committee believes that the department should find ways to further support e-learning that may provide solutions to the current problems (many hours of teaching, staff non residing in Volos, students living beyond the city, competitive learning environments, etc). The EEC believes that it is important to promote the online learning and **recommends potentially increasing the members of staff supporting information technologies.**
- The Erasmus and other European initiatives can have a profoundly positive effect in the education and morale of both faculty and students. **The EEC recommends that all new collaborations with Universities should focus not only in exchange of students and faculty but also in research collaborations between institutions involved based on research agendas.**
- The Code of Ethics requires multiple ways of assessing student performance beyond a single final exam. **We applaud this requirement and further recommend discouraging memorization by including more open-ended, critically thinking questions.**
- Visibility of faculty and student research is limited for a number of reasons, and some of them could be addressed with University policies. **The EEC recommends the adaptation by the University of Thessaly of an Open Access Policy that would allow the retention of non-commercial copyrights by the University of the faculty authors’ scholarly work.**
- Finally, there are a few places where the graduate program could improve and we have provided the rationale in an earlier section as well as were included as future plans by the faculty. Summarizing here, **the EEC recommends**
 - the development of more detailed descriptions of research directions and standards;
 - the introduction of small enrolment fees so that the uneven graduating rates between the two postgraduate programs are addressed and the status of very

long-term PhD students is clarified;

- appropriately equipped office space for graduate students, preferably within a specialized research laboratory space;
- increased ratio of publications in international journals to reflect better on the department and allow for stronger international presence;
- funding to enable graduate students to organize and attend national and international research seminars and lectures as a core part of their program;
- stronger connection between the undergraduate and postgraduate students with research seminars and mentoring of undergraduate students by graduates.

There are other, smaller recommendations that we discussed with faculty and students, such as the utilization of social network support for graduates and alumni/alumnae, and addressing worries about plagiarism and cheating through education and the introduction of an honour code. We are sure that the department will address them appropriately.

We view our list of recommendations above as a great opportunity by a **well functioning, talented, hard working department** to increase its visibility and faculty and student satisfaction from their efforts. We have no doubt that the department is committed to do as much as possible and we are looking forward to enjoy the pride of their accomplishments.

The Members of the Committee

	Name and Surname	Signature
1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____