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HELLENIC REPUBLIC



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**Accreditation Report
for the Undergraduate Study Programme
(Integrated Master) of:**

**Department: Spatial Planning, Urban Planning and Regional
Development**

Institution: University of Thessaly

Date: June 2020



**Επιχειρησιακό Πρόγραμμα
Ανάπτυξη Ανθρώπινου Δυναμικού,
Εκπαίδευση και Διά Βίου Μάθηση**
Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης



Report of the Panel appointed by the HAHE to undertake the review of the Undergraduate Study Programme (Integrated Master) of Spatial Planning, Urban Planning and Regional Development of the University of Thessaly for the purposes of granting accreditation

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PART A: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE REVIEW

I. The External Evaluation & Accreditation Panel

The Panel responsible for the Accreditation Review of the Undergraduate Study Programme (Integrated Master) of Spatial and Urban Planning and Regional Development of the University of Thessaly comprised the following four (4) members, drawn from the HAHE Register, in accordance with Laws 4009/2011 & 4653/2020:

1. Professor Nikiforos Stamatiadis (Chair)
University of Kentucky, USA
2. Dr. Antonia Noussia
London South Bank University, United Kingdom
3. Athanasios Papaioannou
EurA AG, Germany
4. Christos Koutakos
Technical Chamber of Greece

II. Review Procedure and Documentation

The External Evaluation and Accreditation Committee (EEAC) met for the first time on June 25 during the training session of the HAHE. A follow up meeting was scheduled on June 26 to discuss the approach for the visit and the roles of the panel members. The chair identified a series of documents to be reviewed prior to the site visit and the members agreed to complete the review before the first meeting on Monday, June 29.

The onsite visit was conducted via online conference meetings due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and started on June 29 and lasted until June 30, 2020. The committee wrote the report in the following days (July 1-4) though collaborative meetings held also online.

The EEAC met initially the Department Head and the Vice Rector of Academic Affairs of the University where some initial presentations of the university and the department took place. The next session involved members of the faculty charged with the accreditation efforts (OMEA) and a more detailed presentation of the various activities of the department regarding the study program, faculty and staff, student body, and research activities were presented. A discussion ensued that provided more details for the various presentations and documents that the EEAC had already reviewed. A meeting with the faculty was then in the schedule where a free-flowing question and answer period occurred. The final meeting of the day was with recent graduates of the program in order to gauge their experience and identify how well their studies are serving them in their current work environment.

The second day started with a prerecorded video tour of the facilities and a discussion followed to address any questions that EEAC members had. A session with current students in the program followed where their opinion was sought on several issues relative to the program, their experiences and course loads. The next session involved employers and partners of the program aiming to address the readiness of the graduates for the market as well as identify areas of cooperation between the department and employers. The final two sessions were with the faculty working on the accreditation committee and with the vice-rector where a quick summary of the visit was discussed.

Overall, the faculty and staff had prepared a rigorous visit program with presentations and discussions. They were open to discussion and eager to answer questions and show us both the strengths and the weaknesses of the programs. The EEAC was impressed by the exemplary level of cooperation with the Head and all members of the Department. The EEAC was especially impressed with the students and recent graduates, their attendance, sincere views, collaboration and interest of the EEAC review.

A series of reports and other documents were provided to the EEAC prior and during the visit. The main documents that were used included the Internal Evaluation that the Department developed in 2019, the External Evaluation completed in 2014, the Curriculum Guide and course syllabi, the evaluation metrics and goals for the future, and all operational guides of the Department. In addition, all PowerPoint presentations were provided at the end of each session with additional documents.

It is apparent that the online discussion and meetings worked well and allowed for the completion of the program in a succinct manner. Obviously, the lack of any social interactions during the visit is detrimental to the overall approach, since they provide more insight on the

various aspects of the program and allow for additional, oftentimes informal, feedback and discussions. If this process continues in the future, it may be desirable to spread the meetings over a longer period of time, since typically in-person onsite visits last three days.

III. Study Programme Profile

The Spatial Planning, Urban Planning and Regional Development program has been in place since 1989 and it was among the first Departments that were included with the establishment of the University of Thessaly. Initially, it was called Department of Spatial Planning and Regional Development, in 1994 the title 'Engineering' was added in its name, and in 2000 the name was amended to include Urban Planning. This is a 5-year program where students are required to complete a total of 52 courses (42 required and 10 elective) along with the completion of the Diploma Thesis and Practical Training. The program has an equivalency of 300 ECTS not including the Practical Training credits. Students can identify one or two concentration areas in which they select their elective courses and then complete their thesis on similar thematic areas. Students also have the opportunity to select courses among all five concentration areas and thus have a more generic knowledge of a variety of topics. The Department has developed a fairly detailed Curriculum Guide where recent changes in the program are outlined to ensure that students understand the changes and the potential impacts in completing their degree. In addition, course syllabi are available for all courses taught online in the web page of the Department. Students are given the opportunity to evaluate the courses they attend, and their input is considered in adjusting course content and delivery aspects.

Graduates of the program obtain the title of Spatial Planning, Urban Planning and Regional Development Engineer and they can become members of the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE). In 2019, TEE started recognizing the graduates of the program as a separate category of engineers with clearly defined roles and responsibilities that delineate their work environment and provides a separate registration category. Graduates can be employed in both the private and public sector and most of the graduates have been successfully placed in both sectors after their graduation. There are seminars during the first week of classes that identify the work environment for graduates and provide freshmen with information relative to future job market and potential opportunities. Moreover, throughout the academic year, seminars are held with professionals working in the field that provide additional information and exposure to market options and work environment. The Practical Training also provides graduates with an opportunity to explore job prospects, gain valuable work experience and make contacts.

There are 21 faculty members that support the educational and research activities of the program and all have doctoral degrees from institutions abroad and in Greece. An issue of impending concern is the ability to replace those that are going to retire in the near future and ensure continuity of the program. The Department has a commendable number of publications per faculty (1.6 per faculty in referred journals) and a large number of research activities, both in projects and funds, with a good presence and share of programs funded through the European Union (EU). The Department was evaluated in 2014 through an External Evaluation Committee (EEC) and almost all of the recommendations of the report have been addressed or are in the process of been addressed. The Department follows the required procedure for establishing quantitative metrics that define their progress as well as target goals to be achieved in the near future.

For the last five years, the average number of registered undergraduate students is approximately 520, while the numbers of Master and Doctoral students are approximately 120 per year each. This generates a ratio of approximately 25 undergraduate and 11 graduate students per faculty. The infrastructure for delivering the program (class rooms, laboratories, libraries, etc.) are adequate and fairly modern.

PART B: COMPLIANCE WITH THE PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Academic Unit Policy for Quality Assurance

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD APPLY A QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY AS PART OF THEIR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT. THIS POLICY SHOULD EXPAND AND BE AIMED (WITH THE COLLABORATION OF EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS) AT ALL INSTITUTION'S AREAS OF ACTIVITY, AND PARTICULARLY AT THE FULFILMENT OF QUALITY REQUIREMENTS OF UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES. THIS POLICY SHOULD BE PUBLISHED AND IMPLEMENTED BY ALL STAKEHOLDERS.

The quality assurance policy of the academic unit is in line with the Institutional policy on quality, and is included in a published statement that is implemented by all stakeholders. It focuses on the achievement of special objectives related to the quality assurance of study programmes offered by the academic unit.

The quality policy statement of the academic unit includes its commitment to implement a quality policy that will promote the academic profile and orientation of the programme, its purpose and field of study; it will realise the programme's strategic goals and it will determine the means and ways for attaining them; it will implement the appropriate quality procedures, aiming at the programme's continuous improvement.

In particular, in order to carry out this policy, the academic unit commits itself to put into practice quality procedures that will demonstrate:

- a) the suitability of the structure and organization of the curriculum;*
- b) the pursuit of learning outcomes and qualifications in accordance with the European and the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education;*
- c) the promotion of the quality and effectiveness of teaching;*
- d) the appropriateness of the qualifications of the teaching staff;*
- e) the enhancement of the quality and quantity of the research output among faculty members of the academic unit;*
- f) ways for linking teaching and research;*
- g) the level of demand for qualifications acquired by graduates, in the labour market;*
- h) the quality of support services such as the administrative services, the Library, and the student welfare office;*
- i) the conduct of an annual review and an internal audit of the quality assurance system of the undergraduate programme(s) offered, as well as the collaboration of the Internal Evaluation Group (IEG) with the Institution's Quality Assurance Unit (QAU).*

Study Programme Compliance

The Department has established a Quality Assurance Policy for the undergraduate program that is commensurate to the program and includes a commitment that satisfies the requirements and ensures a continuous improvement process. The Department has set up a committee consisting of faculty members that meet periodically to discuss the goals of the quality assurance, identify areas of improvement and establish a set of actions to be undertaken to achieve these goals. The

committee follows the overall University guidance for ensuring the quality of the program and works closely with the university representatives to ensure compliance.

There is a culture of continuous improvement of the quality of the program as demonstrated through the various interactions of the EEAC with the faculty, staff, students and graduates of the program. As an example, students are required to complete a course evaluation at the 10th or 11th week of the semester that forms a feedback loop for the faculty to not only address course content and outcome goals but teaching methods as well. Students attested to the fact that their input is taken seriously, and they have confirmed actions taken based on their course evaluations.

The Department believes that the Quality Assurance Policy guarantees an undergraduate program that balances knowledge and skills and addresses the learning outcomes of the program. In addition, the Department strives to provide a study program that reflects current educational and sector trends, employs the required faculty and staff to satisfy program needs, promotes incorporation of research advancements in classroom teaching, and aims to develop technically qualified graduates that can be employable. The Department is also committed to an annual internal evaluation of the study program to ensure that it reflects current knowledge and market trends. At the same time, a review of the Quality Assurance process is undertaken to ensure compliance with national and university policies.

The Department has developed a set of quality metrics that is using to guide their actions and strategic planning. These metrics are compiled annually and are based on the metrics developed by HAHE. The metrics used include values for teaching quality, faculty load, student supervision, student satisfaction for both course delivery and content, and faculty performance regarding research activity and publications. The Department has also developed a set of target goals that are based on a set of quality indicators with desirable values to be achieved in the near future. These values are based on targets that the Department establishes along with others that are set externally from the School of Engineering or the University of Thessaly. The goals defined in the Internal Evaluation of the Department are paired with several of the quality metrics that are used and monitored and there is an adequate coverage for tracking progress and achievement of goals. The committee that is set up to ensure the quality of the process and program is also charged with reviewing the progress in achieving the goals of the metrics and monitoring adjustments aiming to address this progress.

The Department communicates the Internal Evaluation and the processes for the Quality Assurance in their web page and is available for all to review.

Panel Judgement

Principle 1: Institution Policy for Quality Assurance	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

It is apparent that the process that has been developed and set up is appropriate for ensuring compliance with the principle. One of the aspects of the principle that the EEAC discussed with

the faculty is the manner with which the target goals are set and whether these are feasible to be achieved given the funding issues that the Department (and the University as a whole) may be facing. Some of the goals are achievable with increased activities of the faculty that would require minimal funding resources, such as increasing the number of students studying abroad and attracting foreign students to study at the Department, while others may not be easy to achieve without a significant reallocation of resources and activities. Recent changes in the development of the goals should allow the Department greater freedom in establishing their goals. Therefore, it is recommended that the Department revisits and adjusts these goals to reflect the Department's ability and should be set with their priorities in mind and not external values (as it was noted to the EEAC).

Principle 2: Design and Approval of Programmes

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD DEVELOP THEIR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES FOLLOWING A DEFINED WRITTEN PROCESS WHICH WILL INVOLVE THE PARTICIPANTS, INFORMATION SOURCES AND THE APPROVAL COMMITTEES FOR THE PROGRAMME. THE OBJECTIVES, THE EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES, THE INTENDED PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND THE WAYS TO ACHIEVE THEM ARE SET OUT IN THE PROGRAMME DESIGN. THE ABOVE DETAILS AS WELL AS INFORMATION ON THE PROGRAMME'S STRUCTURE ARE PUBLISHED IN THE STUDENT GUIDE.

Academic units develop their programmes following a well-defined procedure. The academic profile and orientation of the programme, the objectives, the subject areas, the structure and organisation, the expected learning outcomes and the intended professional qualifications according to the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education are described at this stage. The approval or revision process for programmes includes a check of compliance with the basic requirements described in the Standards, on behalf of the Institution's Quality Assurance Unit (QAU).

Furthermore, the programme design should take into consideration the following:

- *the Institutional strategy*
- *the active participation of students*
- *the experience of external stakeholders from the labour market*
- *the smooth progression of students throughout the stages of the programme*
- *the anticipated student workload according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*
- *the option to provide work experience to the students*
- *the linking of teaching and research*
- *the relevant regulatory framework and the official procedure for the approval of the programme by the Institution*

Study Programme Compliance

The Department has recently updated the study program to reflect current trends in the profession and address learning outcomes, required skills and knowledge levels required for the graduates in order to be ready to meet employer requirements while considering existing faculty abilities and expertise. Each of these areas provides unique opportunities and challenges to be incorporated in the study program that the Department has considered and addressed in the current curriculum. The study program also aims to satisfy the requirements set forth from the University, which entail the increase of the quality of education offered, the ability to better address local community needs, and improvement of their position in global university rankings. The Department has adopted these goals in their strategic program and are utilizing advancement of interdisciplinary teaching and research, adjustment of the study program to current research trends and market needs, and adaptation of the study program to the students' needs.

The current study program is based on a successful completion of a set of required courses that address issues relative to the three main thrusts of the Department, i.e., spatial planning, urban planning, and regional development. In addition, students are required to complete 10 more courses among a set of elective offerings that can either be concentrated within one or two

thematic units (concentration) or without any particular concentration. The study program is similar to what other programs offer and provides adequate flexibility to students to customize their studies based on their desires and needs. The study program is structured with an almost uniform semester load of courses throughout the 10 semesters, with the exception of the last two when the students will typically work on their Diploma Thesis. The students who participated in the EEAC session attested the overall appropriateness of the program with regards to the course load and the fact that the program becomes progressively heavier with the advancement in years to reflect the need of more targeted courses that provide higher professional content.

The notion of elective concentrations is a program aspect that the EEAC and faculty discussed at length, since it seemed to be a fairly long list of options. The Department reached the current study program approach based on a multi-input approach where comments were sought from faculty, employers, recent graduates and TEE and after a year-long process of meetings dedicated only to this topic. An issue facing the Department is the need to provide adequate background to students to be able to handle all three areas of the study as well as the specifics of the thematic units (concentrations), which may not allow adequate in-depth familiarization with some areas.

Students are also required to complete a 2-month Practical Training working either at a public or private entity. This provides them with an opportunity to gain valuable work skills and further understand their future field of employment and market opportunities. The Department has developed a guide that explains the required steps to complete this activity and it is fairly well laid out. Typically, students complete their Practical Training in the summer, and this may pose an issue since several offices may be closed and thus not allow for a successful completion of the training. It is therefore desirable to complete the training throughout the year to avoid such issues. In addition, there is no systematic accounting of this experience in the current system and this may result in uneven experiences among the graduates.

The study program meets the basic knowledge requirements for such a program and it compares reasonably well with other similar programs in Greece and abroad. The general areas covered in the program are similar to those in other universities and provide an adequate background for graduates that can compete with graduates from other universities. The study program as it currently stands, covers the basic needs required for the students to be capable of being employed once graduated and they have the qualifications to be successful engineers. This was attested through the discussions of the EEAC with recent graduates and employers, who all spoke very positively about their experience in competing to secure a job (graduates) and the qualifications and readiness of the graduates to immediately integrate into the work arena (employers). The employers in particular spoke very highly not only of the technical skills required for successful employment and advancement but also of the excellent preparation of the graduates regarding their communication skills (both oral and written); a strong testament of the program's strength in addressing this issue.

The study program is explained in a fairly detailed document that provides guidance to students in completing their studies. The current program also outlines in significant detail the changes occurring in the next few years while the program transitions to the new curriculum and this is very helpful for students who are already in the program. In addition to the study program, there is a Diploma Thesis guide that describes the process and steps required for the

completion of the thesis. There is also a seminar course that the students also enroll in order to ensure that they understand the process and effort required to complete the thesis. This is considered critical and it was introduced as an aid for students, since the thesis is completed individually while most of all other activities (homework, lab reports, case studies, etc.) are completed in teams. In addition, the course syllabi are available online and students can access them to form an idea regarding their content and whether they may align with their interests when considering the elective offerings. Students can also discuss course content with faculty and address any remaining questions that are not clear from the online syllabus; an aspect that was attested through the discussions with students and graduates.

The Department has established a procedure for reviewing the study program annually where input is sought from faculty, students, and other stakeholders. This process allows for a continuous check of the program to ensure that the learning objectives of the program are met. As noted above, input from external stakeholders is sought and considered during the review process. The faculty expertise and research activities are also heavily considered, since they are the persons delivering the required knowledge. The most recent update of the program is a good indicator of such activity aiming to capture recent research trends and market shifts.

Panel Judgement

Principle 2: Design and Approval of Programmes	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

The External Evaluation & Accreditation Panel agrees that this Programme leads to a Level 7 Qualification according to the National & European Qualifications Network (Integrated Master)	YES	NO*
	X	

**In case of negative judgement, please justify.*

Panel Recommendations

Overall, the Department has developed an appropriate study program for the student body and it is reflected in the qualities of its graduates. There are a few aspects that the department may want to consider in the future in order to use resources in a more efficient manner and further improve the quality of its graduates.

The first aspect deals with the number of thematic units (concentrations) and the number of elective courses. It may be desirable at some point to revisit this issue, albeit the effort expanded to reach the current study guide and approach and provide fewer areas of concentration and elective course offerings. The 2014 External Evaluation had recommended the inclusion of urban regeneration and transportation, both of which have been addressed successfully. However, the multiple offerings from current faculty may reduce the ability to offer more courses in any of the three main areas (i.e., spatial planning, urban planning and regional development) of the Department and thus dilute its strength. Several of the courses in these thematic areas could be easily covered as cross-referenced and offered courses with

other Departments at the University and thus release resources to better address the spatial planning, urban planning, and regional development focus of the Department. This may be even more critical when considering how to replace future retiring faculty and could be achieved through a strategic planning of addressing current and emerging trends in research and covering these areas of expertise. In addition, the Department has recognized the need to reallocate the percentage of courses among the required, elective and foundational courses and this needs to be addressed in order to allow for better preparation of the students on several technical aspects.

The second aspect deals with the need for a systematic evaluation of the Practical Training. As it stands now, there is no such structure, and this could result in discrepancies in the experiences of the students. As a minimum requirement could be a debriefing of the experience or a completion of a summary of activities during the engagement. In addition, it is recommended to encourage students to undertake the practical training throughout the year.

Principle 3: Student-centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD ENSURE THAT THE UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES ARE DELIVERED IN A WAY THAT ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN CREATING THE LEARNING PROCESS. THE ASSESSMENT METHODS SHOULD REFLECT THIS APPROACH.

Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. The above entail continuous consideration of the programme's delivery and the assessment of the related outcomes.

The student-centred learning and teaching process

- *respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;*
- *considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate;*
- *flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods;*
- *regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods aiming at improvement;*
- *regularly evaluates the quality and effectiveness of teaching, as documented especially through student surveys;*
- *reinforces the student's sense of autonomy, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teaching staff;*
- *promotes mutual respect in the student - teacher relationship;*
- *applies appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.*

In addition :

- *the academic staff are familiar with the existing examination system and methods and are supported in developing their own skills in this field;*
- *the assessment criteria and methods are published in advance;*
- *the assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary is linked to advice on the learning process;*
- *student assessment is conducted by more than one examiner, where possible;*
- *the regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances;*
- *assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;*
- *a formal procedure for student appeals is in place.*

Study Programme Compliance

The faculty enables independent student paths through offering a balanced mix of required and elective courses giving students the ability to create an individual learning experience based on their personal needs and goals. Moreover, it is necessary to offer a plethora of different teaching methods because of the character of the studies (from lower scale urban design projects to more complex regional development topics). These teaching methods range from bibliography study, laboratory practice, field practice, internship, interactive teaching and educational and teaching visits closely connected to the industry and practitioners. There appears to be no major issues with the teaching techniques used by the faculty members of the Department. The students expressed in general satisfaction with the teaching approaches of

their lecturers and the achievements of their efforts. The EEAP is aware of instances of miscommunication between faculty and students but believes that those are minor and due to the transitional phase in the specific topic.

Assessment criteria are communicated on a timely manner and are also available in the course syllabus that is published on the Department’s webpage. There is an appeals process in place where students are given the possibility to discuss their progress and get feedback on the grades they have received before they are published (finalized) on the online platform. The faculty has been running a student-based course and faculty assessment process for some years now. The student assessments of the faculty, presented in the Internal Evaluation report of the Department, communicate a very good overall impression of the teaching quality of the last years.

Mitigating circumstances are not addressed fast enough to bring the necessary changes. As these matters are dealt on the institutional level though, there is little room for action from the Department.

The faculty has no relevant formal procedure implemented for dealing with student objections, as noted in the Internal Evaluation report (page 17).

Panel Judgement

Principle 3: Student- centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

In general, the Department has implemented a student-centered learning and teaching, that is reflected on the course profiles and syllabi and the acceptance from the students. The EEAC recommends the establishment of a clear and easy formal procedure for dealing with student objections. This procedure should include a clear documentation of the actions taken and the final outcome.

Principle 4: Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD DEVELOP AND APPLY PUBLISHED REGULATIONS COVERING ALL ASPECTS AND PHASES OF STUDIES (ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION).

Institutions and academic units need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, manage and act on information regarding student progression.

Procedures concerning the award and recognition of higher education degrees, the duration of studies, rules ensuring students progression, terms and conditions for student mobility should be based on the institutional study regulations. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on institutional practice for recognition of credits among various European academic departments and Institutions, in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' study period. Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed (Diploma Supplement).

Study Programme Compliance

The Department has set up regulations covering the students and their studies.

The students typically enrol in the University through the Panhellenic exams. An orientation week is offered at the beginning of their first semester where the students are introduced to the study program, field of practice, and university life in general. Furthermore, each student is assigned a faculty member as an academic advisor who oversees the student's progress and advises them on their decisions regarding their studies.

The Department has implemented the ECTS throughout its study program, thus satisfying in principle the strengthening and facilitation of the processes of academic recognition among the cooperating institutions of Europe. The EEAC was not able to verify the extent to which students can transfer credits obtained from other universities to their program. The Internal Evaluation report indicates that there is a University-wide process for such credit recognition and transfer.

The records show relatively low mobility levels among faculty and students. International exchanges and collaborations with other academic institutions and research agencies, although very active in previous years, appear to be in a decline. The faculty indicated that they are planning to increase recruiting and advertising efforts to encourage students to participate in international mobility programs as well as to attract international students to their program.

The students receive documentation with their grades upon graduation including the Diploma Supplement that identifies the credits received.

The students are required to complete a Diploma Thesis and a Practical training in order to graduate. The Department has developed a detailed guide for each activity which are posted

online. In addition, the Department has recently started a series of seminars where the various aspects of the completion of the thesis are presented and discussed in order to familiarize the students with the process and requirements of the thesis. This was deemed necessary, since the students typically work in groups throughout their studies while the thesis is completed individually. The Practical Training is required for the completion of the degree and students can freely choose the organization or entity where to undertake it. This is a great opportunity for students to become familiar with their future field of work, improve their skills, and allow them to establish possible contacts with future employers as several recent graduates attested to. However, there is no mechanism in place that evaluates their experience or provides any feedback for future adjustments.

Panel Judgement

Principle 4: Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

The EEAC observed that the Department follows a reasonable approach in ensuring student admission and completion of studies. The EEAC recommends that the current efforts to increase student and faculty mobility should be increased. In addition, the University-wide issue of addressing procedures regarding the recognition and transfer of ECTS points from the host university should be reviewed to allow for easier credit transferring. Another recommendation deals with the need for a systematic evaluation of the Practical Training. As it stands now, there is no such structure, and this could result in discrepancies in the experiences of the students. As a minimum requirement could be a debriefing of the experience or a completion of a summary of activities during the engagement.

Principle 5: Teaching Staff

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD ASSURE THEMSELVES OF THE QUALIFICATIONS AND COMPETENCE OF THE TEACHING STAFF. THEY SHOULD APPLY FAIR AND TRANSPARENT PROCESSES FOR THE RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEACHING STAFF.

The Institutions and their academic units have a major responsibility as to the standard of their teaching staff providing them with a supportive environment that promotes the advancement of their scientific work. In particular, the academic unit should:

- *set up and follow clear, transparent and fair processes for the recruitment of properly qualified staff and offer them conditions of employment that recognize the importance of teaching and research;*
- *offer opportunities and promote the professional development of the teaching staff;*
- *encourage scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research;*
- *encourage innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies;*
- *promote the increase of the volume and quality of the research output within the academic unit;*
- *follow quality assurance processes for all staff members (with respect to attendance requirements, performance, self-assessment, training etc.);*
- *develop policies to attract highly qualified academic staff.*

Study Programme Compliance

There are 21 full time faculty members drawn from a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds with expertise and research activity which reflects the interdisciplinary character of the Department. In addition, there are 13 staff members who are responsible for the laboratories of the Department. There are also part time staff on temporary contracts. All faculty and staff members are actively involved in research that supports and complements the delivery of the study program and teaching of the courses. The Department also encourages faculty to relate and translate their research activities into their courses. The publication track record of the faculty and staff is excellent and confirms the strong research profile and activities of the Department.

Faculty members have the right to and are encouraged to take the opportunity of a fully paid, 6-month sabbatical leave, which is offered to permanent members of staff every three years. This provides the opportunity for faculty to advance their careers and engage in professional development opportunities. The Department maintains connections with many institutions in Greece and abroad leading to teaching and research collaborations and staff mobility opportunities, which are highly encouraged. Several staff of the Department have participated in ERASMUS teaching mobility exchanges and many of them have had sabbatical and visiting posts in European and American universities. They also visit regularly institutions abroad as part of research programs and collaborative activities. The Department is considering the development of a process where international mobility activities will be not only encouraged but also rewarded monetarily.

The University encourages the use of the e-class platform, which is not compulsory, and its use depends on the discretion of teaching staff. However, all faculty and staff teaching in the

Department program utilize this platform to post their notes and lecture presentations, course content, homework and assignments, and announcements relative to course activities. The faculty and students view this platform as integral to their learning. The students confirmed the usefulness of the platform and their dependency in following course activities.

Among the international activities of the department is the establishment of The South and East European Development Center (SEED). The Center collaborates with a large number of academic and research institutes in the EU participating in regional research and policy networks. This takes the form of workshops, conferences, invited lectures, short staff visits, joint research, joint participation in EU and national programs, student exchange and transfer of knowledge.

Another commendable effort is the publication of the referred journal *Aeihoros* where the Department faculty serve as editors. This is the only journal in the field of spatial planning, urban planning and regional development in Greece. The goal of the journal is to present current research issues and findings in the field and promotes discussions on various professional and research issues. The faculty has also organized a number of scientific meetings at the local, regional, national and international level.

The Department administers anonymous student evaluation questionnaires regarding the course content and instructor delivery. The EEAC was informed during the discussions with current students of the program of instances where their evaluations resulted in course content changes as well as changes in the delivery approach of courses and/or instructors. This provided a positive feedback for the students indicating their opinion is well regarded and actions are taken based on their input.

The faculty believes that their teaching workload is acceptable as it was stated during the EEAC-faculty discussions. Their opinion was that there is adequate time to complete their work, albeit more instructors, similar to the professionals that the Department used to hire prior to the economic crisis, would reduce their teaching load and increase specialty course offerings. They noted that this is not feasible in the foreseeable future.

There are no formal assessment processes for faculty with respect to attendance and performance. This could be detrimental to the overall performance of the study program due to the location of the university. However, it is the Department Head's role to monitor these activities. These issues can be raised during the promotion process for individual staff.

There are no specific policies to attract faculty and staff and this is a problem as typically the first preference for highly qualified academics first is Athens or Thessaloniki, unless they come from the area around Volos. This could be detrimental to the program and its quality.

There is a clear and transparent process for the recruitment of both full time (permanent/tenure track) and hourly paid (temporary) staff. Posts are advertised at the University and Departmental webpages. For full time posts, a panel of 11 (5 internal and 6 external) members decide on the most suitable candidate based on selection criteria. For part-time posts the panel consists of 2/3 internal members. For permanent staff, there is a gap of 6 to 12 months between recruitment and starting employment. For hourly paid staff, the process is very fast.

Panel Judgement

Principle 5: Teaching Staff	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

The Department has an excellent faculty and staff body with a strong research track record and adequate mobility opportunities and encouragement. The idea to develop a strategic plan for further mobility, especially for international activities, is an excellent concept and it should be implemented in the near future. The Department is also considering the development of a strategic plan to address research priorities and focus areas for the future. This merits immediate attention due to the opportunity of upcoming retirements. The development of a strategic approach for new hires based on current and emerging research trends should be imminently developed to provide a foundation for focus to be placed on hiring new faculty to address these areas. Finally, there is a need for a quicker process to hire new faculty since the time gap could create problems with course offerings and the study program overall.

Principle 6: Learning Resources and Student Support

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD HAVE ADEQUATE FUNDING TO COVER TEACHING AND LEARNING NEEDS. THEY SHOULD –ON THE ONE HAND– PROVIDE SATISFACTORY INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES FOR LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT AND –ON THE OTHER HAND– FACILITATE DIRECT ACCESS TO THEM BY ESTABLISHING INTERNAL RULES TO THIS END (E.G. LECTURE ROOMS, LABORATORIES, LIBRARIES, NETWORKS, BOARDING, CAREER AND SOCIAL POLICY SERVICES ETC.).

Institutions and their academic units must have sufficient funding and means to support learning and academic activity in general, so that they can offer to students the best possible level of studies. The above means could include facilities such as libraries, study rooms, educational and scientific equipment, information and communications services, support or counselling services.

When allocating the available resources, the needs of all students must be taken into consideration (e.g. whether they are full-time or part-time students, employed or international students, students with disabilities) and the shift towards student-centred learning and the adoption of flexible modes of learning and teaching. Support activities and facilities may be organised in various ways, depending on the institutional context. However, the internal quality assurance ensures that all resources are appropriate, adequate, and accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them.

In delivering support services the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and therefore they need to be qualified and have opportunities to develop their competences.

Study Programme Compliance

Since a site visit was not possible, the relevant information assembled through various documents, a prerecorded video presentation and live discussion with staff and students. The space of the Department appears to be well organized and adequate for their requirements of teaching, research and administration.

The Department has nine classrooms of various sizes and two of them are set up with desks that allow teamwork and use of drawings and maps. All classrooms have the required audiovisual equipment to deliver lectures as needed. Apart from these classrooms, there is a large auditorium for 200 people, which is used for teaching as well as conferences, events and external activities. The department has 12 research units which are located in separate rooms on the second floor. All these research units (laboratories) are equipped with the required tools to complete their research and teaching work and several have extensive collections of journals, monographs and books. Finally, there are two computing centers (20 and 32 seats) that are well equipped with personal computers and all required software to support teaching activities supervised by technician and are open long hours. One of the centers has also all required printing devices (printers and plotters) to allow for proper development of drawings and reports.

A good practice that staff proudly presented to the EAAC, is a reading room which houses a collection of 5,500 titles, books and journals that could address the teaching, learning and research needs of both students and staff. This complements the University of Thessaly Central

Library which is located in the center of the city of Volos. There are comments from students that the location of the library, away from the buildings of the Department, prevents its frequent use.

The entrance lobby has a small bookcase and posters displays as well as areas for students to congregate and study during breaks.

Funding for purchasing resources and equipment can be obtained through complicated procedures that the University manages and with funds from the Ministry of Education. However, funding is not adequate (€14.000 a year approximately) and the only available means are funds from research programs. Also, the University Research Committee supports each Department with an additional €12.000 a year and this amount can be used to address the needs of the Department including purchase of equipment, teaching material, research activities, hiring teaching assistants etc. Faculty also underscored during the discussion with the EEAC that they often rely on research funds to purchase equipment that they utilize during their teaching, since it is not possible to use most of the other funding streams for such purchases.

The Department has established the concept of academic advisors where students are paired with faculty and thus, they could reach out to the faculty for advising on various topics. Other support services (e.g. boarding, career counseling, student welfare, etc.) are part of the University facilities and can be found in different location in Volos.

Panel Judgement

Principle 6: Learning Resources and Student Support	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

The EEAC was satisfied from the existing facilities and their quality. It is apparent that the Department takes good care of the property and teaching can be completed in an appropriate environment. It should be noted though that required maintenance and upkeep is essential for the continued progress and support of the students.

Principle 7: Information Management

INSTITUTIONS BEAR FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLECTING, ANALYSING AND USING INFORMATION, AIMED AT THE EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES OF STUDY AND RELATED ACTIVITIES, IN AN INTEGRATED, EFFECTIVE AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE WAY.

Institutions are expected to establish and operate an information system for the management and monitoring of data concerning students, teaching staff, course structure and organisation, teaching and provision of services to students as well as to the academic community.

Reliable data is essential for accurate information and for decision making, as well as for identifying areas of smooth operation and areas for improvement. Effective procedures for collecting and analysing information on study programmes and other activities feed data into the internal system of quality assurance.

The information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the Institution. The following are of interest:

- *key performance indicators*
- *student population profile*
- *student progression, success and drop-out rates*
- *student satisfaction with their programme(s)*
- *availability of learning resources and student support*
- *career paths of graduates*

A number of methods may be used for collecting information. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analyzing information and planning follow-up activities.

Study Programme Compliance.

At the institutional level, the University has developed an information system for collecting and recording data on the overall operation of the institution, following the suggestion and guidelines developed by HAHE. The Department has provided the EEAP an extensive list of data and quality indicators, which are up to date. The analysis was presented in a manner that was easily understood and well-paced, including graphs, that allow the identification of trends and the comparison between academic years. As noted in other parts of this report, the Department conducts questionnaires that evaluate course content and instructor effectiveness every semester and then disseminates these findings to the instructors for their own analysis and actions to be undertaken. Overall, the Department performs very well on all fronts, based on the data provided to the EEAC.

Panel Judgement

Principle 7: Information Management	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

There are no recommendations for this principle, since the Department performs well and has established the appropriate procedures to collect the required data for their evaluations.

Principle 8: Public Information

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD PUBLISH INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR TEACHING AND ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES WHICH IS CLEAR, ACCURATE, OBJECTIVE, UP-TO-DATE AND READILY ACCESSIBLE.

Information on Institution's activities is useful for prospective and current students, graduates, other stakeholders and the public.

Therefore, institutions and their academic units provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer, the intended learning outcomes, the qualifications awarded, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students, as well as graduate employment information.

Study Programme Compliance

The main way to publish and circulate information is the webpages of the Department at the University of Thessaly site. There is clear and helpful information for prospective and current students and anyone who is interested in the teaching and research activities of the faculty and Department overall. The structure of the webpage is clear and easy to navigate. The main page has a legible layout with a menu bar at the top with the main options and an announcement area for current events and news at the side. The Department has a monthly newsletter that is online that provides information on faculty activities, professional conferences, and other announcements.

There is clear information on the structure of all the available programs from undergraduate to PhD level, including timetable for current students. There is also information on postdoctoral and lifelong learning programs.

A separate area presents the extensive research activities and the various products including research activities, services, publications, collaboration agencies, and contact information of the 12 research units. In addition, the publications produced in the Department are posted. The CVs of teaching, research, technical and administrative staff are grouped according to their roles, although the description of the role and CV for some of the members needs updating.

The academic unit Policy for Quality Assurance is available in Greek only. The policy is described in many details with links to HQA pages.

There is an inconsistency between the contents in Greek and in English and this is understandable as some topics are relevant only to the Greek public, students and academics.

Panel Judgement

Principle 8: Public Information	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

The webpage of the Department is well organized, and it provides the appropriate information to the public and students. The EEAC recommends a more frequent update of the faculty CVs to reflect their current activities.

Principle 9: On-going Monitoring and Periodic Internal Review of Programmes

INSTITUTIONS SHOULD HAVE IN PLACE AN INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FOR THE AUDIT AND ANNUAL INTERNAL REVIEW OF THEIR PROGRAMMES, SO AS TO ACHIEVE THE OBJECTIVES SET FOR THEM, THROUGH MONITORING AND AMENDMENTS, WITH A VIEW TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT. ANY ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE ABOVE CONTEXT SHOULD BE COMMUNICATED TO ALL PARTIES CONCERNED.

Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to maintain the level of educational provision and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.

The above comprise the evaluation of:

- *the content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline, thus ensuring that the programme is up to date;*
- *the changing needs of society;*
- *the students' workload, progression and completion;*
- *the effectiveness of the procedures for the assessment of students;*
- *the students' expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme;*
- *the learning environment, support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme*

Programmes are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders. The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date. Revised programme specifications are published.

Study Programme Compliance

The Department has in place a process for an annual evaluation of the study program that ensures that latest research trends and changing needs of the society are incorporated in the program. Moreover, there is an annual evaluation process of faculty and course content by the students and an evaluation of the support services and learning environment by the faculty. All these efforts result in the development of an action plan that can be carried out to address any issues and improve the quality of the study program delivered.

The data is collected through a series of questionnaires that the Department has developed in cooperation with the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the University. The results of these questionnaires are summarized and discussed during a faculty meeting and they are submitted to the QAU. The results for each course evaluated are shared with the faculty member(s) who taught the course and appropriate actions are initiated to address any issues raised as part of the evaluation. As noted in Principle 1, the students are aware of the usefulness of their input and they have observed changes as a result of their input. The Department establishes an ad-hoc committee to review the findings of the questionnaires and develop possible actions to address possible shortcomings of the evaluations. The same committee also reviews requests for new courses as well as proposed course content adjustments to address the current issues and faculty changes. All such changes are brought forth at a faculty meeting in order to be finalized and approved by the faculty.

The goals of this activity are to ensure that the course content remains abreast of current changes in the field, modifications of course delivery approaches and content, and to inform the faculty of upcoming changes and evaluation results of the Department. Course content changes often include the addition of more lectures implementing a problem-solving approach,

inclusion of a larger number of examples demonstrating applications of the theory taught, expansion of laboratory content and activities, development of tutorial sessions for addressing lecture content in greater detail, and including site visits that offer examples that students can contemplate and analyze. All of such activities could result in better achieving the learning outcomes of the program and higher caliber of graduates.

The Department also engages in continued communication with graduates and monitors their progress in the field. This allows for the development of close relationships with the units they are working and provides an opportunity for the Department to engage with their employers and establish collaborative activities to address research aspects, community needs or requests for proposals.

Panel Judgement

Principle 9: On-going Monitoring and Periodic Internal Review of Programmes	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

The Department is appropriately engaged in an evaluation process of their program and activities. However, the EEAC considers the mandate for annual evaluation of the study program as an overburden activity that may be not so meaningful especially when research findings that could require course content changes are not achieved so frequently.

An issue that the Department should consider as part of this programmatic evaluation is the trends of the emerging research as well as the profession and market needs in strategically addressing future faculty higher. The concern of upcoming retirements was emphasized during the discussions. The EEAC suggests that the Department identifies the emerging areas in the field and attempts to address them with the new hires and not simply replace them with ones from a similar background. This certainly implies that course offerings are covered or could be covered through cross-listing and offerings with other departments.

Principle 10: Regular External Evaluation of Undergraduate Programmes

PROGRAMMES SHOULD REGULARLY UNDERGO EVALUATION BY COMMITTEES OF EXTERNAL EXPERTS SET BY HAHE, AIMING AT ACCREDITATION. THE TERM OF VALIDITY OF THE ACCREDITATION IS DETERMINED BY HAHE.

HAHE is responsible for administrating the programme accreditation process which is realised as an external evaluation procedure, and implemented by a committee of independent experts. HAHE grants accreditation of programmes, with a specific term of validity, following to which revision is required. The accreditation of the quality of the programmes acts as a means of verification of the compliance of the programme with the template's requirements, and as a catalyst for improvement, while opening new perspectives towards the international standing of the awarded degrees.

Both academic units and institutions participate in the regular external quality assurance process, while respecting the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate.

The quality assurance, in this case the accreditation, is an on-going process that does not end with the external feedback, or report or its follow-up process within the Institution. Therefore, Institutions and their academic units ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

Study Programme Compliance

The Department was evaluated in the past through an EEC in 2014. The External Evaluation report had developed a set of recommendations and the Department has made efforts to address all of them and has already implemented most of them. The recommendations implemented include the expansion of the study program to include courses in infrastructure and transportation, incorporation of new digital technologies in teaching methods and course content, expansion of interdisciplinary course offerings, include offerings in urban regeneration, revision of the program study to reflect market needs and trends, improvement in the process of estimating more properly environmental impacts, energy use and sustainability, development of information for market options for graduates, increase of the international activities of the faculty and staff, and continuation of the professional and scientific level of the Department.

There have been no other evaluation efforts outside of those HAHE sponsors. However, the Department implements the procedures set forth by the University QAU, collects and analyzes the required data periodically, and provides their results to the QAU.

All faculty and staff recognize the importance of the external evaluation and value the past and future recommendations. They all believe this helps the Department achieve its goals and purpose and it also helps them improve along the way.

The EEAC had the opportunity to interact not only with almost all faculty and staff members but also with current students of the Department as well as recent graduates. All showed a great level of enthusiasm and professionalism as well as commitment in supporting and aiding the EEAC in any manner and request made.

Panel Judgement

Principle 10: Regular External Evaluation of Undergraduate Programmes	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

Panel Recommendations

There are no recommendations for this principle, since it is apparent that the Department values the significance and recommendations of such external evaluations and they seem willing to undertake any recommendations made.

PART C: CONCLUSIONS

I. Features of Good Practice

The Department has demonstrated a series of good practices during the onsite visit and documents provided. These practices include:

1. A study program that is founded in continued evaluation and update to include current research findings and address community and societal needs;
2. An infrastructure appropriate and adequate to provide the required teaching and research activities and support student activities;
3. A culture of continuous evaluation and improvement based on efforts observed during the onsite visit and prior evaluation documents;
4. A study program that combines adequate theory and practice and provides students with a great spectrum of knowledge;
5. A faculty body that is exemplary trained with significant research presence locally, nationally and internationally and high levels of productivity;
6. A faculty body that works very closely with local and regional authorities on various aspects of rural planning and regional development through its laboratories;
7. A study program that commands prominence in the respective fields not only nationally but internationally; and
8. A comprehensive program including an all-inclusive curriculum and other associated elements that develops extremely well qualified graduates that employers seek out for hiring.

II. Areas of Weakness

The Department is also facing a number of issues that do not allow it to fully reach its capabilities. These areas include:

1. Inability to secure funds for teaching needs that are often covered through research funding;
2. Inability to attract international students in the program; and
3. A program study that is designed and customized around the expertise of the faculty.

III. Recommendations for Follow-up Actions

The EEAC is very pleased with the overall performance of the Department and the qualifications of its faculty and staff to complete the required educational goals and research activities. The following recommendations could simply serve as the long-range goals of the Department while establishing their strategic plan and are suggested with the intention of advancing the current placement of the Department and increasing its prominence both nationally and internationally. The EEAC proposes the following recommendations as follow-up actions for the Department:

1. Explore the possibilities of course cross-listings and offerings with other units at the University;
2. Maintain and expand interdisciplinary collaboration in both research and teaching;
3. Expand activities to increase international mobility of students and faculty both incoming and outgoing;
4. Develop a strategic plan to identify emerging areas in the field and consider new hires to address these needs;
5. Identify and implement a mechanism for evaluating Practical Training in a more systematic manner; and
6. Explore means and approaches for accelerating new faculty hires.

IV. Summary & Overall Assessment

The Principles where full compliance has been achieved are: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10

The Principles where substantial compliance has been achieved are:

The Principles where partial compliance has been achieved are:

The Principles where failure of compliance was identified are:

Overall Judgement	
Fully compliant	X
Substantially compliant	
Partially compliant	
Non-compliant	

The External Evaluation & Accreditation Panel agrees that this Programme leads to a Level 7 Qualification according to the National & European Qualifications Network (Integrated Master)	YES	NO
	X	

**The members of the External Evaluation & Accreditation Panel for the UGP
(Integrated Master)**

Name and Surname

Signature

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____