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HELLENIC REPUBLIC

H.Q.A.

HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE AND
ACCREDITATION AGENCY

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

**Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural
Enterprises, University of Patras (Agrinio)**

March 2014

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The External Evaluation Committee (EEC)

The Committee responsible for the External Evaluation of the Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises of the University of Patras (Agrinio) consisted of the following four expert evaluators drawn from the Registry compiled by HQAA in accordance with Law 3374/2005:

1. **Konstantinos Giannakas**, Harold W. Eberhard Distinguished Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, and Director of Center for Agricultural & Food Industrial Organization, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S.A. (**Coordinator**)
2. **Nicholas Kalaitzandonakes**, MSMC Endowed Professor, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, and Director of Economics and Management of Agrobiotechnology Center, University of Missouri, U.S.A.
3. **Panos Konandreas**, Director at Trade Policy Plus (since 2008). Previously, Head of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Office in Geneva, Switzerland.
4. **Andronikos Mauromoustakos**, Professor, Agricultural Statistics Laboratory, Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, U.S.A.

Introduction

The EEC visited the Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises of the University of Patras (Agrinio) during the period February 10-12, 2014, and completed the evaluation report during the period February 13-15 in Athens.

During the evening of February 10, the EEC met with the Rector of the University of Patras, Professor George Panagiotakis; the Deputy Rector of Academic Affairs, Professor Pantelis Kyprianos; the Deputy Rector of Financial Planning and Development, Professor Ioanna Daouli; the Head of the Department, Professor Athanasios Ladavos; and members of the Internal Evaluation Committees (MOΔΠΠ and OMEA). The University leaders expressed their support to the Department and excitement of its becoming, recently, part of the University of Patras. All participants expressed their support to the HQAA evaluation process and appreciation of the EEC's efforts.

On February 11, the EEC met with the members of the Internal Evaluation Committee and the faculty of the Department who provided overviews of the Department, its undergraduate and graduate programs of studies, the four research laboratories, and the Unit's Internal Evaluation Report (IER), and responded to numerous questions posed by the EEC. The meeting with the faculty was followed by visits to laboratories, classrooms and other facilities of the Department. The campus visit was followed by a meeting of the EEC members at the Hotel where the process of developing the External Evaluation Report was initiated.

On February 12, the EEC had meetings with the Departmental secretary, other administrative and laboratory staff, and undergraduate, MBA, and PhD students of the Department. Following these meetings, the EEC traveled to Patras where it met, once again, with the Rector of the University, the Head of the Department, and members of the internal evaluation committees for a debriefing before departing for Athens to complete the evaluation.

The EEC was provided with several supplementary documents, including the Study Guidebook of the Department, statistical data, and various documents related to the operations of the Department.

The EEC found the IER and supplementary material to be comprehensive, sincere and, as such, a valuable input in the evaluation process. The faculty, staff and students were welcoming, courteous and appreciative of the EEC's efforts and evaluation process.

A. Curriculum

APPROACH

- **What are the goals and objectives of the Curriculum? What is the plan for achieving them?**

The objective of the Department is to produce graduates who can effectively serve private and public enterprises involved in agriculture and food industries. It offers students theoretical and practical/applied training in Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises by combining knowledge from economics, business, agronomic, environmental and food sciences.

The Department offers programs at both undergraduate and graduate (MBA and PhD) levels.

The undergraduate program offers a degree in Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises after a minimum of 10 semesters of studies required for the successful completion of 61 courses and a mandatory diploma thesis (which is, normally, written during the final semester of studies and is equivalent to 4 courses).

The graduate programs focus on Business Administration and Marketing in the Food Industry. As stated in the Departmental website, these programs allow students “to come into contact with the business environment, through case studies and business simulation games, which have been developed and acquired based on the actual characteristics of the Greek economy and through visits to places of production.”

Additional stated goals of the graduate programs are “to sharpen students' analytical and synthetic thinking”, make them “feel more creative and able to offer to the community” and help them acquire essential skills to be able to operate “in the highly competitive environment of food enterprises.”

The graduate program awards MBA degrees with two specializations – Marketing and Management of Total Quality – after a minimum of 4 semesters (i.e., 15 mandatory courses – no electives) and the successful completion of a mandatory thesis in the final semester.

The PhD program awards a degree without any mandatory coursework, after undertaking research leading to the successful completion of a dissertation.

An important graduate program in *Certification of the Quality of Agricultural Products*, to be offered jointly with the Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Management in Agrinio and the Department of Medicine at the University of Ioannina, has not been in effect since 2008. The EEC supports the re-establishment of this program considering that it could meet an essential market need and it would differentiate the Department in an area where equivalent curricula and related facilities are scarce in Greece and, possibly, in the broader southern European region.

- **How were the objectives decided? Which factors were taken into account? Were they set against appropriate standards? Did the unit consult other stakeholders?**

Since its establishment in 1998 as "Department of Agribusiness Management", the Department has undergone several phases of reorganization and planning. A notable reform of its objectives and related curricula took place in 2004, after a review by a committee of external experts. As a result, its graduates now receive certification by the Greek Chamber of Economists (OEE). In 2006, the Department was renamed Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises. Some implications of these changes are discussed below.

The Department has an established mechanism for reviewing its curricula in the form of a Curriculum Committee. A challenge in curricula development has been the on-going

uncertainty in the position of the Department within the administrative structure of existing regional universities.¹ The most recent development created not only a disruption of an administrative nature but also uncertainties regarding the physical location of the Department.

- **Is the curriculum consistent with the objectives of the Curriculum and the requirements of the society?**

The curriculum is, in part, consistent with the objectives of the Curriculum and the requirements of the society. There are some redundancies and missing elements discussed under implementation below.

- **How was the curriculum decided? Were all constituents of the Department, including students and other stakeholders, consulted?**

The initial curriculum was developed by considering the curricula of similar departments in Greece. It is unclear whether students and other stakeholders were consulted during the 2004 curricula review. The outcome of this review was the relative strengthening of the economic and business administration components of the program of studies. The EEC feels that there is a need for systematic and on-going assessment of market needs and alignment of the curricula to the needs of stakeholders and the society at large.

- **Has the unit set a procedure for the revision of the curriculum?**

As mentioned above, the Department has an established mechanism for reviewing its curricula in the form of a Curriculum Committee.

IMPLEMENTATION

- **How effectively is the Department's goal implemented by the curriculum?**

The Departmental goals are only partially met since (a) key elements of the modern industrialized agri-food system are not currently reflected in the curriculum, and (b) the curriculum is rigid and overly long.

- **How does the curriculum compare with appropriate, universally accepted standards for the specific area of study?**

The duration and breadth of the undergraduate program meet or exceed equivalent degrees in Europe and elsewhere. The EEC feels, however, that the current economic component is more akin to a traditional agricultural economics rather than a modern business administration one.

- **Is the structure of the curriculum rational and clearly articulated?**

Given the desired breadth of the program of studies, some of the mandatory courses may not add the necessary value. The EEC is of the view that a relatively large share of the curriculum is spent on advanced-level courses (e.g. Micro II, Macro II, and Statistics II), some overlapping courses (e.g., Agricultural Policy and EU Economic Integration) and some peripheral courses (e.g., Civil Law). The EEC recommends the move of, at least some, of the aforementioned courses to the electives category.

Another structural aspect of the undergraduate curriculum that could be revisited is the mandatory requirement of a thesis. While the EEC recognizes that this endeavour benefits some students, this requirement lengthens the time of the degree completion and strains the scarce faculty resources of the Department.

The EEC recommends the elimination of the thesis requirement and the restructuring of the

¹ After being a part of the University of Ioannina, the Department was moved to the newly established University of Western Greece in 2009, and to the University of Patras in 2013.

curriculum to better reflect its business administration nature. In this context, the addition of courses focusing on: behavioral/experimental economics, consumer behavior in quality-differentiated food product markets, innovation & intellectual property rights, economics of food safety, quality and certification would strengthen the economic/business administration component and improve the curriculum. Furthermore, the addition of a course on the economics of contracts (that increasingly govern the, vertical and horizontal, relationships in the agri-food system) is essential for the development of the human capital the Department aspires to.

With respect to the ‘Practicum’ (πρακτική άσκηση, which is currently recommended but not required in the curriculum), the EEC feels that every effort should be made to make this opportunity available to all students as it facilitates their professional growth and development and enhances their employment prospects.

Finally, regarding the graduate programs, the curriculum lacks a formal/regular seminar series to expose students to the research of other staff of the Department, researchers and research ideas from other disciplines and other national and international applied research institutes and universities. Partly this is due to the lack of resources (see elsewhere in this Report). However, Department-based seminars, from faculty and graduate students upon completions of thesis are costless and should be highly encouraged. The benefits of a seminar series can be significant and could facilitate the formation of research teams around transdisciplinary, current and emerging, research issues.

- **Is the curriculum coherent and functional?**

While the curriculum shows a logical sequence, the system allows a student to carry a fundamental core course “indefinitely” over the years, without having passed it. This reflects the fact that prerequisites are not truly required. This system is, of course, highly undesirable because it allows students to take “specialized” courses without the proper foundation, to the detriment of themselves, other students in the classroom, as well as their natural and effective progression in the learning process. The consequences of this issue are reflected in other parts of this Report having to do with time and degree completion rates as well as performance attained.

- **Is the material for each course appropriate and the time offered sufficient?**

The EEC sampled a number of syllabi and textbooks used and found them to be appropriate and sufficient.

- **Does the Department have the necessary resources and appropriately qualified and trained staff to implement the curriculum?**

The breadth and depth of the curriculum is disproportional with the human and physical resources available. The average student to faculty ratio is about double the national average. While the EEC feels that the current faculty members are well-qualified to implement the current curriculum, faculty members are obliged occasionally/often to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise.

The small number of faculty in the Department has also affected the number of electives being offered. For instance, the EEC noted that 22 out of the 36 available elective courses were not offered during the 2012-2013 academic year.

The EEC also noted that elective courses are only permitted from the 5th semester onwards. The EEC is of the view that such courses should be offered much earlier (even from the 1st semester) as a motivation to strengthen students’ commitment to the Department and improve attendance.

The EEC noted the high turnover of faculty, often resulting in delayed replacement (or no replacement at all) of departing staff as a result of lengthy administrative/hiring procedures. This impacts the course offerings, accessibility of part-time teaching staff and the curriculum cohesion and continuity.

In addition, physical resources (including audiovisual equipment) are also a major problem as discussed elsewhere in this Report. This constrains the options available to staff in

effectively carrying out their, already heavy, teaching load. There is also a problem of classroom scheduling due to their limited number.

RESULTS

- **How well is the implementation achieving the Department's predefined goals and objectives?**

Subject to the limitations mentioned earlier, the implementation of the curriculum achieves most of the Department's goals and objectives. It is clear to the EEC that including in the core curriculum essential subjects needed by the continually evolving industry and related technology, is of critical importance to the graduates. The lack of certain subjects in the curricula (as discussed above), limits the achievement of the Department's objectives, measured in terms of supplying the market with competent and competitive professionals who are in a position to add value to the dynamic and rapidly evolving agri-food industry.

- **Does the Department understand why and how it achieved or failed to achieve these results?**

It is the impression of the EEC that the Department believes that the current curriculum achieves its objectives.

IMPROVEMENT

- **Does the Department know how the Curriculum should be improved?**

It is not clear to the EEC that the Department fully appreciates the need for a curriculum revision addressing the weaknesses mentioned earlier.

- **Which improvements does the Department plan to introduce?**

Based on the IER, the Department plans to (a) undertake a continuous updating and rationalization of the curriculum, (b) improve coordination of the subject matters, and (c) reduce overlap.

B. Teaching

APPROACH

- **Does the Department have a defined pedagogic policy with regard to teaching approach and methodology?**

Based on the IER, the Department does not appear to have a clearly stated pedagogic policy which defines its teaching approach. The course structure and teaching methods, however, are in line with a general policy of developing and transmitting knowledge in the science and applied technology areas through teaching and applied research.

As part of its pedagogic policy, the Department needs to further develop entrepreneurship, leadership and ethics skills through problem-based learning and group assessment.

Teaching methods used

Teaching methods used include lectures and laboratory exercises for the application of theoretical knowledge. PDF, Word documents and Power point presentations are used as teaching aids.

Based on limited information from student interviews and evaluations, attendance in lectures is poor. Students did mention that selected courses and teachers did have higher participation rates due to common knowledge that students cannot pass these courses without attending. Students indicated that they prefer laboratories, practical training, and industry site visits compared to attendance of theory lectures.

The EEC strongly supports the implementation of teaching methods that foster student

participation in the process of learning and increase class attendance and student graduation rates. Greater use of technology could help achieve this goal.

Teaching staff/student ratio

According to data provided by the Department for the year 2012-2013, the permanent teaching staff consisted of five professors, one associate professor, two assistant professors, and four lecturers. Ten external teaching collaborators (part-time, non-permanent faculty) employed by the Department in 2012-2013 were eliminated and the permanent faculty picked up their teaching load. Thus, the registered student per faculty member ratio was at the time of the evaluation 66:1, more than twice the national average.

Teacher/student collaboration

The students interviewed expressed satisfaction with their contact and collaboration with the faculty who make themselves available for consultations as needed. Students indicated that faculty were available and dealt with both academic and personal issues. The EEC notes and applauds the student satisfaction with the teaching staff even though the current student to faculty ratio is unsustainable.

Adequacy of means and resources

Existing class rooms are inadequate, poorly equipped and poorly maintained. On-campus student housing and other amenities are currently nonexistent, and take away from the overall university experience found elsewhere.

Books and other teaching materials were found appropriate for the subjects covered. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of journal articles and books through the library lending system. The library has some limited electronic access to international literature, and a very small number of computer workstations relative to the active student body. Not all spaces in the Department have WiFi connectivity which is necessary for accessing material using phones, tablets and notebooks.

Use of information technologies

Most of the lectures are presented using power-point projection. All students are provided university e-mail accounts. The posting of key teaching material on-line (using Dropbox, Google Drive or SkyDrive), so that students can have remote access to it, is a good practice and should become more common.

The EEC feels that the student educational experience could be enhanced with an improved technology infrastructure in the classrooms and better wireless access within the buildings to create a digital environment conducive to learning and increase student campus presence and participation.

Examination system

The Department follows the traditional examination system in lecture and laboratory courses. The exact type of examination may vary with the nature of the course with most courses having one final exam. The evaluation procedures and examination schedule are communicated to students via the e-class system.

The number of students participating in examinations is highly variable. The grades achieved by the students are generally low with extremely small number of students achieving excellent marks (>8.5/10). The average GPA of graduating students the last seven years ranges from 5.6 to 6.8. The overall average for the number of years it takes to graduate for those who succeeded to earn their degree is approximately 7.4 years for that same period (2007-2013), similar to what the EEC has observed in similar Greek departments but excessively long, nevertheless.

IMPLEMENTATION

- **Quality of teaching procedures**

The teaching methods utilized by the faculty are the same with those used in other Greek academic institutions. They include chalkboard, transparencies, slides, laboratory analyses, and limited fieldwork. The EEC believes that the use of computer and network facilities need to be updated and greatly expanded to address student needs.

- **Quality and adequacy of teaching materials and resources**

The EEC believes that the teaching material is adequate for the topics covered. In general, books, instructor notes, and other teaching material are considered appropriate. The library is very small for the needs of the current student body and there are no alternative study halls. Longer library hour operations and better access to electronic journals and related resources would be a big improvement that would impact student teaching and learning.

- **Quality of course material. Is it brought up to date?**

Although a large number of available books in the core courses is, generally, up-to-date, the quality of certain course material needs to be updated frequently.

- **Linking of research with teaching**

It is the impression of the EEC that the teaching and research activities of the Department are not closely connected. There is limited graduate student involvement (particularly of PhD students) in teaching, and this could be an effective way of bridging the gap between the Departmental teaching and research.

- **Mobility of academic staff and students**

Mobility of students and staff is almost non-existent. The EEC believes that the Department would benefit from stronger participation in mobility programs but, in order to also provide exchange opportunities, it needs new and improved facilities. With the current resources and infrastructure, it would be almost impossible to host visitors, such as foreign participants in the ERASMUS program.

- **Evaluation by the students of (a) the teaching and (b) the course content and study material/resources**

Organized attempts to evaluate, through surveys, the teaching faculty effort have been underway. Nevertheless small student participation makes the data and the inference somewhat unreliable. Future evaluations need to encourage and promote higher student involvement and participation and also allow student access to the results.

RESULTS

- **Efficacy of teaching**

Student evaluation of instruction for courses taught in the Department (with summary graphs provided in Appendix 4 of the IER) shows that over 50% of the students involved in the evaluation rate the lecture, the instructor, and the lab as good to very good. The questionnaire is considered appropriate and includes questions on teaching, course content, and material used. Student evaluation of instruction was carried out in both semesters of the academic year 2012-2013 for almost all courses.

Course and instructor evaluations should be interpreted with caution, however, as they are based on responses from about 10% of the student body. For instance, there were 183 student evaluations for all courses of the spring semester and 414 evaluations for the fall semester. Both numbers were small reflecting the low course attendance by students during the evaluation. With such caveats in mind, average scores for the two semesters in 2012-2013 for all instructors were very good (3.9 and 4.0) and for the course were also good (3.6 and 3.5).

The EEC strongly supports the strengthening and improvement of the evaluation process as

well as the increased student involvement. The adoption of a secure online evaluation system that is open and available for input for a week before the final exams could be a move in the right direction.

- **Discrepancies in the success/failure percentage between courses and how they are justified**

It appears that some students entering the Department face difficulties in “hard science” courses. Since this appears to be a common deficiency, the EEC suggests that courses where discrepancies in success/failure are observed are given extra attention and consideration so that the ways they are taught and examined could be improved.

- **Differences between students in (a) the time to graduation, and (b) final degree grades**

According to the IER, the numbers of graduating students range from 24 (~20%) to a respectable 76 (~50%) out of approximately 130 students entering each year with an average GPA ranging from 6.6-6.8. The EEC notes that these graduation rates range from low to acceptable levels but also notes that almost none of the graduating students graduated with a grade “A” (>8.5 – outstanding performance) and that should be a concern for comparison purposes with analogous departments. On the other hand, the MBA program is successful in graduating almost all of its students on time.

- **Whether the Department understands the reasons of such positive or negative results?**

The Department seems to attribute these results to the increased number of students (dictated by the Ministry of Education) and the elimination of the minimum threshold of grade 10 for admission to higher education institutions, which results to the enrollment of students that may be poorly prepared to succeed in challenging subject matters. As regards graduate students, their high motivation, quality and maturity are considered among the reasons of the high graduation rates of the MBA programs.

IMPROVEMENT

- **Does the Department propose methods and ways for improvement?**

The Department’s proposed methods of improvement include the:

- reduction in the number of students entering the Department to the 2007 levels
- improvement of the Departmental infrastructure
- increase in the number of faculty members

- **What initiatives does it take in this direction?**

The Department has been raising these issues with the administration of the University.

The EEC supports these initiatives of the Department. In addition, the EEC strongly supports the implementation of teaching methods that increase class attendance and foster student participation in the process of learning. In addition to promoting a more meaningful educational experience, increased student attendance of class lectures should

- reduce the length of studies of students
- increase the success rate of students during their first attempt at passing a course
- increase the grade point average of graduating students.

The EEC also recommends the establishment of a limit in the number of examinations the student is allowed to participate to reduce the number of students showing up on examinations without preparation.

The EEC suggests that the Department should make an effort to recognize and reward outstanding students and teachers.

Finally, the EEC encourages the support of student participation in the ERASMUS program.

C. Research

APPROACH

- **What is the Department's policy and main objective in research?**

The Department does not seem to have a unified research policy with explicit objectives. Research occurs within four laboratories and it is driven by the interests of the individual faculty and external opportunities. Research activities across laboratories are generally not coordinated. Laboratories and their faculty, however, coordinate closely in offering the undergraduate and graduate teaching programs of the Department. This organization is not atypical and many other academic departments in Greece as well as in other countries operate in a similar manner.

- **Has the Department set internal standards for assessing research?**

There are no explicit internal standards or Departmental procedures for systematically assessing research output and quality on an ongoing basis. In preparing its IER, the Department collected data on faculty publications in peer-reviewed journals, citations, grants, participation of individual faculty in scientific advisory and editorial boards, individual awards and other indicators. These are generally considered adequate indicators of research output and partial indicators of research quality.

IMPLEMENTATION

How does the Department promote and support research?

Research in the Department takes place in the four laboratories. The Department does not have adequate internal resources to fund and promote research. Most Departmental research is funded through external grants. The Department encourages individual faculty research, and research output is an important factor of individual faculty advancement. As such, there are implicit institutional incentives that promote research and its publication. It is unclear, however, whether, in the long run, a coherent Departmental research agenda and overall research excellence can be advanced through implicit incentives alone.

Quality and adequacy of research infrastructure and support

The infrastructure of the four laboratories is variable. Two of the laboratories (Food Technology, Plant Production) have recently acquired modern equipment through NSRF grants and are supported by prolific faculty and well-trained and productive technicians. As such, their research mission is well-supported and they should continue to be productive in the future. The Agricultural Economy & Agricultural Policy and the Agribusiness Management laboratories are also supported by productive faculty but their infrastructure is fully depreciated and needs upgrade.

Scientific publications

Based on the IER, for the 2009-2013 period, the overall publication record of the Departmental faculty comprised of 9 books or monographs, 106 publications in peer-reviewed journals, 59 peer-reviewed conference proceedings, 21 non-referred conference proceedings, and 8 articles in edited books. Prior to 2009, the current faculty of the Department contributed 6 books or monographs, 176 publications in peer-reviewed journals, 141 peer-reviewed conference proceedings, and 17 articles in edited books. It is important to note that the publications of laboratory technicians and staff were not fully reflected in these figures.

Research projects

Departmental faculty can develop research proposals and seek external funding through regional, national and European programs. The faculty has been active in submitting proposals and securing research projects and funds. For the period 2003-2013, the Departmental faculty participated in 38 funded national or European research projects. Funding sources included the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) (or "Εθνικό Στρατηγικό Πλαίσιο Αναφοράς (ΕΣΠΑ)»--Χρηματοδότηση: Περιφέρεια Δυτικής Ελλάδας);

«ΗΠΑΚΛΕΙΤΟΣ II»; TEMPUS “Improving Academia – Industry Links Food Safety and Quality”; «ΘΑΛΗΣ», LACTIMED GT 4; and others. In the last three years, Departmental faculty coordinated 6 research projects and participated in a total of 19 funded projects, bringing more than 1.4 million euros to the Department.

Research collaborations

Almost all Departmental faculty have meaningful and, often, ongoing collaborative research with researchers from various national and international academic institutions. The personal research network of the faculty is, decidedly, national in nature. Formal international relationships at the Departmental level are quite limited (i.e., there is one program with the University of Basilicata in Italy and another with the University of Lisbon in Portugal).

RESULTS

• How successfully were the Department’s research objectives implemented?

As noted earlier, the Department does not have a coherent set of research objectives and targets.

• Scientific publications

The EEC finds that the research productivity of the Department is high. Over the last five years, the faculty of the Department published, on average, 1.8 articles in peer-reviewed publications and received 29 citations per year. The publication ratio has remained quite stable over this period while the number of citations has doubled – from 16 to 32 citations per faculty per year. These figures well exceed those in similar institutions in Greece and are comparable with far-better resourced academic units in Europe.

The EEC notes that publications and citations of the Department are not evenly distributed across all faculty members. Some of the associate and full professors in the Department have contributed a large number of the publications and citations in the last few years. Indeed, some of the senior faculty has scientific publication outputs that make them competitive at an international level. The EEC notes, however, that many of the lecturers and assistant professors in the Department have also been quite prolific and have contributed to the increased citations in the last few years.

While the EEC is highly impressed with the research productivity of the Department and the publication output of its faculty, especially when considering the underlying resources, it also believes that the Department would benefit from adopting a coherent and explicit internal publication evaluation process. Indeed, the EEC encourages the Department to incorporate the journal impact factor and other quality indicators in such considerations in order to encourage the continuous improvement in research quality, at least at one level – publication of its research in the very top international disciplinary journals. The EEC strongly believes that such an improvement, even at the cost of lower publication numbers, would enhance the reputation of the Department and its faculty and would improve its ability to compete for external grants and resources.

• Research projects

As indicated above, the faculty of the department has been active and has secured more than 1.4 million euros in research grants over the last three years. One million euros was carried by a single NSRF grant and tends to skew the average. Still, there is a clear increase in the external resources secured by the faculty of the Department in recent years, a rather encouraging trend. The EEC does not have information on the efficiency level in grant seeking activity in the Department (i.e., the number of successful grants relative to the total grant applications). Still, it is clear to the EEC that grant funding has been the most important driver of the Department’s research productivity and its PhD program in the past. Externally funded research projects are closely associated with Departmental publications and dissertations pursued by PhD candidates. Furthermore, the EEC strongly believes that the laboratory modernization and equipment upgrades funded by the NSRF grant, have positioned the Department for cutting-edge research in high impact areas for many years to come. In all, the EEC finds that the productivity of externally funded research projects in the Department has been outstanding.

Since internal funding of research operations, travel for presentations and national/international networking, graduate fellowships, research infrastructural improvements and other research activities will likely be limited in the foreseeable future, the significance of external funding cannot be overstated. The EEC believes that an increase in the grant funding activity of the Department is of paramount importance to its research mission. In this respect, the EEC believes that the Department must institute explicit incentives to encourage grant seeking activity as well as other relevant activities (e.g., networking and training programs) which can improve the efficiency of securing large framework grants.

- **Research collaborations**

As indicated above, the collaborative network of the Departmental faculty is mostly national in nature with limited international nodes. Still, it is clear to the EEC that research collaborations have been frequent and generally beneficial to the productivity of the Departmental faculty as indicated by the various joint publications and grant applications. The EEC believes that faculty in the Department could benefit from the development of international scientific networks that are strategically chosen in order to improve their opportunities for participation in large EU grant proposals, academic exchanges and specialized knowledge acquisition. The EEC also believes that the faculty would benefit from the development of active networks with colleagues in the University of Patras in order to promote the active integration of the Department in the broader University environment as well as to leverage the existing University research and teaching resources.

- **Efficacy of research work. Applied results. Patents etc.**

Specific information about the impact and application of the Department's research was not provided in the IER and related material. No patents were awarded to faculty members.

- **Is the Department's research acknowledged and visible outside the Department? Rewards and awards**

As indicated by the number of research citations and honors received by members of the faculty, the Department's research is acknowledged and is visible outside the Department. The EEC believes that this visibility can be enhanced through a more consistent publication of the Department's research findings in top disciplinary journals.

The Department also enjoys a certain visibility in the local community, though this visibility could also be enhanced through the continuous cultivation and improvement of relationships with stakeholder groups.

IMPROVEMENT

- **Improvements in research proposed by the Department, if necessary**

In its IER the Department proposed at least two strategic improvements for the further development of its research activities: (a) the enhancement of research areas that can improve its international research standing; (b) the encouragement of activities that can facilitate expansion of its research in new areas while connecting with international institutions that can support exchange of students and faculty, as well the creation of new graduate degree programs.

The EEC is encouraged by the strong interest of the Department in elevating the international standing and visibility of its research programs. In this respect, the EEC believes that the Department would benefit from adopting a structured process of strategic research planning through which it clearly encourages and incentivizes external funding and publication in leading journals as key drivers of research improvement.

Given the available physical and human resources, the EEC is intrigued with the Department's interest in expanding in new research areas while connecting to international institutions. The EEC believes that the Department is already involved in too many research programs that are often thinly supported and that it should look inward instead of outward for expansion in new promising research areas. In particular, while the EEC does not

generally believe that internal integration of research programs within academic departments is always appropriate or beneficial, it finds that in this instance there is a unique opportunity for the Department to marry some of its economic, food technology and plant production research activities. In particular, joint/transdisciplinary research programs in the areas of agri-food innovation (e.g., precision farming, nanotechnology, geographic certification, etc.) with economics and entrepreneurship can prove strategic, as such areas of research are growing in significance and funding. Furthermore, the transdisciplinary nature of the approach could prove attractive to funding organizations that are increasingly demanding a systems-approach to their evaluation and implementation.

In its IER, the Department appears to recognize the opportunities and recommends rationalization and increasing integration of its research programs, though it recommends integration among similar disciplinary programs first. The EEC finds that the Department could benefit more from integrating different disciplinary programs first, especially within the context of pursuing large grants.

- **Initiatives in this direction undertaken by the Department**

The EEC finds that the Department is currently in “survival” rather than in a planning and implementation mode. This is understandable given the constant administrative, funding and personnel changes it has undergone in the last few years. While the EEC is impressed with its resiliency, it also strongly believes that the Department is in desperate need for some sense of stability. Strategic research planning has a long horizon and requires a sense of constancy to be effective.

D. All Other Services

APPROACH

- **How does the Department view the various services provided to the members of the academic community (teaching staff, students)**

The faculty, staff and students of the Department find the existing facilities and services, such as buildings, administration, information technology, and library, marginally acceptable. Due to the shortage of administrative staff and the need of having the librarian assist with secretarial services of the Unit, the Library has, in the past few months, been closing “way too early.” There is complete lack of student dormitories, athletic facilities, study halls, and places where students and faculty can congregate (e.g., λέσχη). Lack of proper road signage has made student access to the existing restaurant dangerous.

- **Does the Department have a policy to simplify administrative procedures? Are most procedures processed electronically?**

The Department has taken significant steps in this direction with the adoption of an electronic student record management system (φοιτητολόγιο) and the use of its website and electronic communication for most of its functions. Lack of specialized administrative staff (there is only one individual – the main secretary – with proper training) has made some of these operations challenging. The leadership of the Department recognizes the need for additional specialized administrative personnel and indicated its desire to address this issue.

- **Does the Department have a policy to increase student presence on campus?**

It does not appear that the Department has a specific policy aimed at increasing student presence on campus. Based on comments by students (and faculty), the lack of student dormitories, athletic facilities, study halls, and places where students and faculty can congregate (e.g., λέσχη), significantly impedes the student presence on campus.

IMPLEMENTATION

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

The Department is currently supported by one secretary and two other staff with limited or no training in administration (one was transferred to the secretariat from the accounting office and the other from landscaping services).

- **Form and function of academic services and infrastructure for students (e.g. library, PCs and free internet access, student counseling, athletic- cultural activity etc.)**

As mentioned earlier, the services provided to students are either nonexistent or poor. In addition, most computers available to students are seriously dated while the Wi-Fi signal is either weak or nonexistent.

RESULTS

- **Are administrative and other services adequate and functional?**

The secretary of the Department is competent, dedicated, and helpful. Her collaboration with faculty is excellent, providing high-level of support. She appears to be in desperate need of specialized assistance with the use of the electronic student record management system (φοιτητολόγιο).

- **How does the Department view the particular results?**

The Department values the effectiveness of the administrative support despite the significant resource constraints and limitations.

IMPROVEMENTS

- **Has the Department identified ways and methods to improve the services provided?**

With both administrative support staff about to leave the secretariat (one to retirement and the other to the landscape services of the University), the Department appears prepared to pursue the hiring of a specialized administrative support staff member. The Department has also identified the need to continuously upgrade and streamline the administrative and communication services in the Department. The development and/or improvement of infrastructure, however, seems to be connected with the future physical location of the Department (i.e., whether it will remain in Agrinio or move to Patras).

- **Initiatives undertaken in this direction**

The need for the hiring of specialized administrative staff has been communicated to the Associate Rector of the University of Patras. Regarding the streamlining of administrative and communication services, the Department has adopted software that can enhance the efficiency of administration and interactions in the Department. Certain administrative functions will be transferred to/serviced by the central University administration in Patras. The Departmental library will be enriched through web access to the central library of the University of Patras.

Collaboration with social, cultural and production organizations

Please, comment on quality, originality and significance of the Department's initiatives

The Department has been trying to enhance its presence in, and interactions with, the local community through a series of collaborations with the Chamber of Commerce; the municipality of Agrinio; the Aitoloakarnania-Lefkada Economists Association; local, regional and national businesses; and cooperatives. These initiatives have received a warm welcome from the local community which, should be noted, has embraced the Department and has created the Friends of the University Departments in Agrinio Association. While important, these collaborations are still limited and quite *ad hoc*. The EEC strongly supports and encourages the strengthening of such relationships, which can enhance the future development and success of the Department. The EEC feels that the Department needs to be more proactive in the relationship with its constituents communicating its willingness and, where appropriate, its ability to address important current and emerging issues of relevance and significance to the private sector, cooperative organizations, policy makers and/or different consumer groups. In addition to bolstering the impact of the Department's research, the development of meaningful relationships with its constituents could enhance the goodwill and resources available to the Department, motivate the research on emerging relevant and significant issues, and create important employment opportunities for its graduates.

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

The Department is planning the strengthening and improvement of both its undergraduate and graduate programs and the EEC is very supportive of this initiative. In this direction, the EEC feels that the undergraduate program needs to be reduced to four (4) years of study and the curriculum needs to be revised/modernized to better reflect the focus/orientation of the degree programs as well as current trends in the agri-food system and the labor market.

The EEC is also very supportive of the Department's desire to grow through the hiring of new faculty members. In addition to reducing the extremely high student to faculty ratio (66/1), new hires could support critical needs in the areas of consumer behavior in quality-differentiated markets, economics of contracts, innovation, information, food safety and certification.

In addition to addressing these new areas, the EEC is also supportive of the Department's desire to build on its research strengths. Where the EEC is less supportive, however, is in the continued operation of the different research programs in isolation. Instead of operating as silos, the EEC believes that there are significant benefits to be realized (both in terms of quality of research output and the ability to attract major research grant funding) through the formation of transdisciplinary teams with members of the Department tackling important, current and forthcoming, issues of relevance to the agri-food system of the area and beyond.

Finally, the EEC supports the improvement of the infrastructure of the Department and services to its students through the development of student dormitories, athletic facilities, study halls, and places where students and faculty can congregate. The EEC feels strongly that the Department should continue to be located in Agrinio, a city that has embraced and supported it and whose economic and social characteristics are consistent with the nature, goals, and ambitions of the Department.

F. Final Conclusions and Recommendations of the EEC

The Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises of the University of Patras (Agrinio) focuses on areas of relevance and significance to the local, regional and national economy and has the potential to make valuable academic and socio-economic contributions. Despite its meager resources and frequent administrative changes and uncertainty, this has been a very productive Department.

Curriculum

- The EEC notes and applauds the Department's desire to have a curriculum that is flexible, dynamic, and adaptable to the needs of the students and the changing conditions of the agri-food system. In this context, the EEC feels that curriculum changes are warranted to better reflect and service the economic/business administration component of the Department's academic programs.
- The EEC feels that the current economic component of the undergraduate curriculum is more of a traditional agricultural economics rather than of a modern business administration one. The addition of courses focusing on behavioral/experimental economics, consumer behavior in quality-differentiated food product markets, the economics of contracts, innovation & intellectual property rights, food safety, quality standards and certification would strengthen the economic/business administration component and greatly improve the curriculum.
- The EEC feels that the required coursework in the current program of studies is excessive and extends the average length of studies beyond national and international standards for analogous programs of study. In this context, the EEC strongly suggests:
 - the reduction in the total number of courses in the curriculum
 - the reduction in the years of study of the undergraduate program from the current five (5) to four (4) years of study.
- The EEC also finds the current policy of requiring all students to conduct an undergraduate thesis arduous and draining to the Departmental resources and recommends, at a minimum, the elimination of the mandatory nature of it.
- The EEC notes that the share of elective courses in the undergraduate program of studies is miniscule (making the program rigid and the tailoring of the educational experience to the student interests and needs impossible) and recommends the significant increase in the share of electives in the overall programs of study.
- The EEC also suggests that the Department institutes and enforces, where appropriate, pre-requisite courses as a way of ensuring a more meaningful and fulfilling educational experience for those involved. In addition, the introduction of pre-requisite courses should go long ways in addressing both the problem of high length of studies and the low grade point average of students.
- Finally, the EEC feels that a properly designed practicum (πρακτική άσκηση) can be very useful and urges the Department to try to make this opportunity available to all students.

Teaching

- The EEC notes and applauds the student satisfaction with the teaching staff and its commitment to the student body and the Department.
- Noting, with concern, the very low class attendance rates, the EEC strongly supports the implementation of teaching methods that foster student participation in the process of learning and increase class attendance.
- In addition to promoting a more meaningful educational experience, increased student attendance of class lectures should
 - reduce the length of studies of students
 - increase the success rate of students during their first attempt at passing a course
 - increase the grade point average of graduating students.
- The student educational experience could also be enhanced with an increased use of applied term papers both as means of learning and student evaluation. Writing several term papers during the course of their study is expected to more than compensate for the removal of the, currently mandatory, undergraduate thesis.

- Increased attendance would also go a long way towards providing more meaningful student evaluations of the courses taught by the Department. The EEC strongly supports the strengthening and improvement of the evaluation process as well as the increased student involvement in it.
- The EEC suggests that the Department should make an effort to recognize and reward its best teachers and students, and encourage and support the student participation in the ERASMUS program.
- Finally, the EEC recommends the adoption and immediate implementation of distance education technologies and methods to satisfy teaching needs with courses offered by relevant departments at the University of Patras (e.g., the Departments of Economics and Business Administration) and elsewhere.

Research

- The EEC notes the significant research productivity of most faculty members as well as efforts to attract grant funding and be involved in relevant national and European research projects.
- The EEC recommends a greater research emphasis on issues that leverage the transdisciplinary core competencies of the Department.
- The faculty is encouraged to consistently target the top disciplinary journals as an outlet for their research in order to continue to enhance the international visibility and reputation of the Department.
- The EEC encourages the increased emphasis on grant-seeking activity, including through the formation of Departmental transdisciplinary research teams. The latter could take advantage of the recent laboratory modernization and equipment upgrades, which can enable cutting-edge research in high impact areas.
- The EEC was very impressed with the quality, professionalism, and productivity of the Laboratory Technicians and Staff and recommends that every effort is made to maximize their productivity and fully integrate them in the research mission of the Department.
- Finally, the Department should make an effort to recognize and reward its more productive members, increase the student involvement in the research projects of the Department, and develop an active research seminar series.

Other

- The EEC recommends that the Department becomes more proactive and strengthens the relationship with its stakeholders. Such an endeavor could enhance the goodwill and resources available to the Department, motivate the research on emerging relevant and significant issues, and create important employment opportunities for its graduates.
- The EEC recommends the hiring of permanent faculty to cover critical needs in the areas of behavioral/experimental economics, economics of contracts, innovation, food safety, quality and certification.
- The EEC strongly supports the improvement of the infrastructure of the Department and services to its students through the development of student dormitories, athletic facilities, study halls, and places where students and faculty can congregate.
- The EEC strongly supports the introduction of tuition fees for the (full- and part-time) MBA programs offered by the Department with the caveat that these fees will be used to support the qualified students who cannot afford to pay, the MBA program, and the academic activities of the faculty members involved.
- Finally, the EEC feels strongly that the Department should continue to be located in Agrinio, a city that has embraced and supported it and whose economic and social characteristics are consistent with the nature, goals, and ambitions of the Department.