

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ  
**Α.ΔΙ.Π.**  
ΑΡΧΗ ΔΙΑΣΦΑΛΙΣΗΣ ΠΟΙΟΤΗΤΑΣ  
ΑΝΩΤΑΤΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ



HELLENIC REPUBLIC  
**H.Q.A.A.**  
HELLENIC QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

## **EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT**

**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

**AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS**

**NOVEMBER 7-11, 2011**

### **External Evaluation Committee (EEC)**

The Committee responsible for the External Evaluation of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development of the Agricultural University of Athens consisted of the following four expert evaluators drawn from the Registry compiled by HQAA in accordance with Law 3374/2005:

1. Professor Konstantinos Giannakas (Coordinator), University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S.A.
2. Professor Michael Bourlakis, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, United Kingdom.
3. Dr. Dimitris Diakosavvas, Senior Economist, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, France.
4. Professor Kostas Karantininis, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

### **Introduction**

The EEC visited the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development of the Agricultural University of Athens during the period November 7-9, 2011, and worked on its report during the week of November 7.

In particular, during the morning of November 7 members of the EEC met with HQAA about the evaluation process and visit to the Department. Following that meeting, the EEC was welcomed to the Agricultural University of Athens by its vice-rector, professor Epaminondas Paplomatas, and the Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, professor Panagiotis Lazaridis. Both leaders expressed their support to the HQAA evaluation process and appreciation of the EEC's efforts.

Next, the EEC met with members of Internal Evaluation Committee who presented the Unit's Internal Evaluation Report and responded to numerous questions posed by the EEC. 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 November 8, the EEC met with faculty members of the Department, members of two special groups of academic and technical staff namely E.E.ΔΙ.Π and E.T.E.Π, administrative staff, post-graduate (Masters) students, doctoral candidates and alumni of the Department.

On November 9 the EEC met with the leaders of the two graduate programs of the Department, visited the Departmental laboratories, lecture halls and computer and meeting rooms and met with undergraduate students of the Department.

On November 10-11 the EEC focused its efforts on the completion of its External Evaluation Report.

The EEC found the Internal Evaluation Report to be complete, honest and, as such, a very valuable input in the evaluation process. The faculty, staff and students of the Department were welcoming, courteous and, for the most part, appreciative of the EEC's efforts and evaluation process.

## A. Curriculum

### Undergraduate program

#### APPROACH

The overall aim of the curriculum is to educate students, develop skills in agricultural research and address problems related to economic, social, political and environmental dimensions of a viable rural development within the framework of the European integration. It aspires to be responsive to the needs of the society and the marketplace so that completion of the program can lead to the vocational position of agronomist with a specialization in agricultural economics.

As stated in the Internal Evaluation Report, the faculty does not feel that the current structure of the curriculum accomplishes these goals.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

The curriculum offers a total of 88 courses, 61 of which are required for graduation with 54 (88.5%) being mandatory and only 7 (11.5%) being elective. Of the total number of courses, 57% is offered by other Departments of the University.

The duration of studies is 10 semesters (5 years). Courses are taught during the first 9 semesters, while the 10<sup>th</sup> semester is devoted to the completion of a thesis.

About 60% of the courses are offered in the first six semesters (3 years) and are devoted to the core (κορμος). Of these core courses, those taught during the first four semesters (i.e., 2 years) are mainly basic science courses (e.g., mathematics, physics, chemistry etc.) and most of the remaining (5/6) are of a general agricultural nature. Agricultural economics courses account for about 20% of the core. Semesters 7-9 are devoted to the study of specialized agricultural economics courses.

The structure of the core is determined at the University level and the Department has very little influence on it. The Department's responsibility lies with the specialization courses. It should be noted that the division of the curriculum in two parts – i.e., Core-Specialization – reflects a long history and tradition of the Agricultural University of Athens where all degree programs offered by its Departments follow a similar structure.

The faculty feels that amendments and revisions of the whole curriculum are made on an *ad hoc* manner and reflect academic staff changes rather than actual educational needs.

#### RESULTS

The EEC notes that the total number of courses required to graduate is 61, of which only 7 are elective. This structure leads, *inter alia*, to the prolongation of the duration of the studies, the low success rates, the very low average grades of graduating students, and the poor attendance of courses (see below). It was encouraging to observe what appears to be a broad consensus among faculty and students on the need to rationalize the curriculum.

Course attendance, including that of laboratories, requires over 30 hours per week and often students follow classes from 8h30 to 18h00, leaving little time for reflecting on the material taught, using the library or undertaking any homework.

Faculty and students expressed serious concerns about the role of the internship (πρακτική άσκηση), which is compulsory and lasts 4 months.

The Department's participation in exchange programs like the ERASMUS has been embryonic. This constitutes a serious impediment to the student (personal and professional) growth and development.

## IMPROVEMENT

The EEC views the curriculum as overly loaded and rigid and the courses as diverse, partially due to the multidisciplinary nature of the program. The courses, however, do not appear well integrated, they lack logical sequence, have high degree of overlap, while the distinction between mandatory and elective courses seems arbitrary.

The EEC recommends that action is taken to reduce the total number of courses and build in more flexibility by increasing the share of elective courses in the program of studies.

The EEC concurs with the opinion expressed by students, alumni and most academic staff, that the curriculum is unbalanced and, by covering two major degree domains (i.e., agronomy and agricultural economics with disproportionately greater emphasis on the former), the Department lacks "identity" – upon graduation, students feel that they are neither agronomists nor agricultural economists.

The EEC believes that is very timely for the Department to clearly define its identity. The EEC's view is that the Department's comparative advantage lies on the field of *agricultural* economics and the sustainable management of rural space rather than in the field of pure agronomy or pure economics. The EEC recommends the streamlining of the curriculum through the inclusion of more agricultural economics courses.

In particular, the EEC believes that: i) the total number of courses required for graduation should be reduced, ii) the segment of the curriculum focusing on the non-economic core courses should be shortened in favor of the agricultural economics component, iii) the non-economic core courses that are currently compulsory should become elective, and iv) thematic overlaps should be eliminated.

It should be noted that the success of this approach would require careful student advising and staff collaboration.

The EEC considers the complete absence of prerequisites and the existing regulatory framework that allows students to carry a course indefinitely, fundamental drawbacks of the program and key in explaining the unacceptably high average time of student graduation (9.6 years in 2009). In addition to creating serious resource issues for the Department and the University, this high average graduation time represents a social problem challenging both students and their families. It should be noted that in most reputable international programs in the field, the vast majority of students graduates shortly after their last (normally 8<sup>th</sup>) semester of studies.

The EEC considers that the internship warrants a fundamental overhaul as there appears to be a consensus among academic staff and students that the current arrangements are often very inefficient, if not a waste of time, for all parties involved.

### **Post-graduate program**

The Department offers two Master degrees – an MBA in Agri-business Management and an MSc in Integrated Development and Management of Rural Space – and a Doctoral Degree (PhD).

#### **APPROACH**

The objective of the curriculum of the MBA Agri-business Management program is to provide students with highly specialized skills in the subject area.

The objective of the MSc in Integrated Development and Management of Rural Space curriculum is to provide graduate students with both the theoretical and practical knowledge on the concept of integrated rural development, as well as with a guide to different methodological approaches to rural development.

The EEC considers that both curricula are consistent with the degree objectives.

The curricula of both Master's programs are, generally, well-structured and designed with specific sets of admission criteria. They are appropriate for developing student skills in the areas of agri-business management and integrated rural development and management of rural space. Nevertheless, some students voiced concerns as to the overlap of some economic courses with relevant undergraduate courses. Students also expressed the wish to have more elective courses available.

The goal of the Doctorate program is to train students to acquire a high level of skills in order to be able to conduct high quality research.

The PhD program is entirely research-based with no required coursework. This is a concern especially for research tools and academic writing courses and seminars.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Students of the two Master programs are required to take eight courses, to be completed in 3 semesters and this is closely monitored.

The courses are taught by well-qualified staff. Part of the teaching staff belongs to collaborating Departments, other Greek universities as well as other European universities.

The curricula are comparable to those offered by reputable international universities. In addition, there is a formal process of curriculum review where internal and external evaluations and revisions are implemented as appropriate.

The building infrastructure for delivery of graduate courses is very satisfactory, with classrooms used being comparable to those in many international institutions.

Students of the post-graduate programs are exposed to a great deal of practical work, which is complemented by study visits and excursions (in addition to the study visit in Greece, students of the Integrated Development and Management of Rural Space visited the University of Ancona in 2011).

The practical dimension in both Master programs is boosted by compulsory seminars delivered by high-level practitioners and policy makers.

Students with an economic background felt that there is considerable overlap with undergraduate courses and that some courses are not covered in sufficient depth.

## RESULTS

Graduate programs appear to operate to a large extent as separate entities in terms of resource facilities (e.g. secretariat support, computers, labs, etc.).

Success rates in both programs are extremely high, often 100%!

The Department in its presentation to the EEC noted that, notwithstanding the serious economic crisis, the number of applicants for the Master programs has remained constant or even slightly increased, which was attributed to the programs' effectiveness and reputation.

Given the worsening economic conditions, however, the EEC feels that there is a good chance that the number of qualified applicants able to incur the cost of studies will be reduced in the near future.

## IMPROVEMENT

The EEC feels that post-graduate students should be allowed the opportunity to select some elective courses across the two Master programs.

The EEC suggests that crash courses are offered before the formal start of the programs for students with a weaker background in economics, mathematics and/or statistics. By enabling students to attend post-graduate courses, such crash courses would allow for strengthening the curriculum and avoiding the overlaps with undergraduate courses mentioned by students.

The EEC noted that only a very small number of PhD students are employed in funded research projects. The EEC feels that the Department should employ the international common practice where a large part of the funding for these projects is used to finance PhD students. This will not only attract higher quality students, but it will also enhance their dedication to their study program, and will improve their research and professional skills. Furthermore, funded PhD students could be used as assistants in teaching, correcting assignments, term papers, midterm exams etc.

There are no formal processes for monitoring the career development of graduate students and the Department should address this issue as it can help improve the structure of its programs.

In view of the economic crisis and the expected cuts in public funds to the University as well as the expected retirement in the near future of a number of teaching staff and the long delays in filling vacant positions, the Department should establish a long-term plan to ensure the viability of its programs.

### **B. Teaching**

#### APPROACH

##### *Teaching load*

##### a. Undergraduate program

The minimum teaching load per faculty member is determined by law and, at the undergraduate program, is currently 6hrs/week/faculty member. This does not include supervision of undergraduate and post-graduate theses. This teaching load is similar to that of other Agricultural Economics programs around the world.

b. Graduate program

At the MSc program Integrated Development and Management of Rural Space (IDMRS) there are 10 faculty members teaching an average of 2.4 hrs/week. These faculty members receive an additional compensation for teaching at the graduate program. The MBA program depends less on internal faculty members (3 faculty teaching an average of 3 hours/week) and relies more on visiting professors from other Greek Universities and abroad. With the exception of one course, MBA courses are taught in Greek.

*Teaching Methods*

There are considerable differences between the undergraduate and post-graduate programs. At the undergraduate level,

- The teaching follows lectures and, in some courses, both lectures and “labs”. The latter are simply exercises in quantitative courses, such as mathematics, econometrics, etc.
- There is very little use of assignments and midterm exams.
- There is a small number of courses (2) using invited speakers for in-class seminars.
- There is a limited number of courses (2 courses) using study visits.
- There is one long, multiple-day excursion for the entire Department at the 8<sup>th</sup> semester.

*Adequacy of means and resources*

The EEC visited the facilities available to the Department and found them to be adequate. Both offices and lecture rooms are well-equipped and in relatively good condition. According to the Internal Evaluation Report, the Department feels that, if attendance rates were increased (see below), the existing facilities would not suffice.

*Teaching staff/student ratio*

Class attendance is very low. There is no mandatory attendance of lectures, except for some labs.

*Teacher/student collaboration*

At the undergraduate level there is very little chance for teacher/student collaboration. At the post-graduate level, in both Master programs, there is closer collaboration between teachers and students.

*Use of information technologies*

The teachers have available audio-visual equipment at their disposal. There is an internet-based teaching platform, E-class, used to upload reading material and course information. The internet could be used more widely to communicate with students, via e-mails etc.

*Examination system*

Following the national education regulatory framework, students have unlimited opportunities to take exams. In the courses with labs, the students take two exams, one for “theory” and one for the lab. This practice is not consistent with international standards and practice, and reflects, mainly, similar examination practices in agronomic and other science disciplines. Given the repeated examination system, students’ participation in the exams is 56% for the theory sessions, and 64% for the labs. The attendance in the exams at both post-graduate programs is 100%. The success rate for the theory and lab examinations is 52% and 71%, respectively.

All students are required to write a thesis before graduation. While the writing of the thesis is supposed to take place during the 10<sup>th</sup> semester of a student’s studies, it is normally postponed for much later as the average duration of studies is significantly greater than 5 years (9.6 years in 2009).

## IMPLEMENTATION

The teachers use modern audio/visual equipment. There were, however, complaints by students about numerous cases of under-utilization of power point presentations as well as cases of excessive use of power point (where students would have preferred a more thorough process on the blackboard).

Textbooks and other auxiliary material (“notes”) are provided to the students free of charge. Often, teachers distribute to the students “notes” parallel to the text book and encourage them to study out of the notes. This is intended to help students have a relatively high success rate at the exams.

The EEC asked to review the textbooks and other course material offered to students. The EEC noted that a large number of books are translations of popular textbooks by well-known authors, published by well-established houses in the international market. There are also a number of textbooks written by faculty members. Without having the time to examine these textbooks thoroughly, the EEC found many of them to be well-written and up-to-date, while others in need of updating and improvement.

The EEC was not very impressed with the quality of the “notes” and questions their role in the process. Many students noted that, in many courses, they only study from the “notes” and that this enables them to receive an acceptable grade at the exams. This could be indicative of two problems:

- a. The education process is examinations-centered and not learning-centered.
- b. The examinations can neither promote critical thinking nor evaluate the students on their understanding of the subjects. They appear, instead, to encourage a dry memorization of pre-fabricated knowledge.

Unlike the post-graduate programs where some of the faculty have been able to introduce their research findings in their courses, there is not much indication of links between teaching and research at the undergraduate level. This may be due to the limited window (3 semesters) the faculty has to actually teach their core competence at the undergraduate level. Another explanation could be the cumbersome and inflexible legislative system that requires a very tedious and long process for the introduction of a new course, which limits the ability of new faculty to teach their topics of research interest.

Regarding the mobility of students and faculty, it appears to be quite limited. In particular, during the period 2003-08, only 11 students used the Erasmus program to study at other EU Universities. Similarly, only 5 foreign students opted at taking courses offered by the Department. Finally, only 1 faculty member visited a foreign University while no foreign faculty visited the Department during that period. It was made evident to the EEC, however, that there is much larger faculty mobility via EU-funded projects.

Regarding the teaching faculty evaluations, there is no incentive scheme to reward high quality teaching. There seems to be, instead, a vicious circle with students feeling that “Nothing will be done” as a result of their evaluations and not completing the evaluation forms. The number of evaluations is, then, extremely low and, hence, not meaningful to the teachers. Therefore, this form of communication between students and teachers and the two-party improvement of teaching is not accomplished.

It was pointed out in the Internal Evaluation Report (p.11) and brought to the EEC’s attention repeatedly, that the almost complete lack of prerequisites is a serious impediment to the quality of teaching, since teachers spend time, especially in advanced courses, teaching material that is “prerequisite.” The EEC recognizes that the lack of prerequisite courses is a systemic problem, hinging upon the large number of courses and the length of studies. However, the EEC feels that this is a problem that should be addressed

seriously and with great care. The imposition of prerequisites in a number of courses is itself a “prerequisite” for the improvement of the quality of teaching.

There are also concerns regarding the quality of the undergraduate thesis. There are strict rules guiding the process and ensuring its transparency as well as strict guidelines concerning the qualifications for the eligibility to proceed with the writing of the thesis. There is also a course dedicated to research methodology and writing, intended to prepare the students for their thesis work. The faculty, however, expressed concerns on the low quality of the submitted theses.

## RESULTS

The EEC recognizes that many of the problems mentioned earlier are systemic to the Greek higher education system characterized by:

- A. Limited correspondence between the education received and the social needs for University graduates.
- B. An education system that is supply-oriented, in the sense that it caters to the needs, path-dependencies, and constraints of a complex and ever-changing legal framework. As a result, the system has been gearing around multiple examinations with students focusing on passing the exam(s). Critical thinking and comprehension of the subject matter are generally not encouraged.

While there is significant variability in the success/failure rates between courses, the success rate in the Department is generally low. This rate is particularly low in some core courses resulting – as indicated to the EEC – in most students carrying these courses to the very last semester of their study.

Regarding the differences between students in (a) the time to graduation and (b) final degree grades, it was pointed out to the EEC that the last student who graduated within the 5-year period of the undergraduate program was in 2004. The average graduation grade has exhibited a decline from 6.9 in 2002 to 6.74 in 2008, while the distribution of graduate grade point averages has been worsening (see Table 7.3 of the Internal Evaluation Report).

Related to the above is the observed increase in the number of the actual years of study. Today, the average student takes almost twice the time planned for the degree (9.6 years). This time was 6.8 years 15 years ago. Many faculty members attribute the decline in grades and the prolongation of studies to the low quality of students, especially those transferring from Departments with lower standards.

It was also brought to the EEC’s attention that the students’ attendance of lectures – especially of the “theory” lectures – has been limited. While students were quick in attributing this to a perceived low quality of teaching, the EEC feels that the very heavy course load and the exam orientation of the process can account for much of the reduced student interest and participation in this educational experience.

“Working students” have also been mentioned as a reason for problems like the low attendance rates and poor grades in the Department. A study undertaken by the Department in 2005, however, found that less than 15% of students had a full time job. It was not even clear whether this was symptomatic of students prolonging their study well beyond the 5 years. Whether the aforementioned perceptions are right or wrong, the faculty recognizes, and the EEC concurs, that working students need to be accommodated in ways that do not compromise the quality and character of the program.

## IMPROVEMENT

The Department seems to believe that most problems associated with teaching originate from the curriculum structure, namely, the disproportionately long core and the constraints and rigidities posed by an archaic regulatory framework.

While the EEC acknowledges the problems posed by the curriculum structure and the national regulatory constraints, it feels strongly that the teaching program, as well as the other activities of the Department could also be improved through a closer connection with the “market” (i.e., the participants in the agri-food marketing system, producer and consumer organizations, local and national government, as well as relevant international organizations and regulatory bodies). In this context, the two graduate programs should be good models and guides for the improvement of teaching.

The faculty should involve the students more into the evaluation process, asking students to contribute constructively to the development of the questionnaire and the overall evaluation process. Students should also be kept abreast about the fate of their recommendations.

Lighter teaching loads could be used as a reward to increased productivity and performance. Of course, this must be practiced with caution and should not impede the quality of teaching in the Department.

The EEC believes that each academic unit should be able to determine the standards and requirements for entrance into its program(s). This would encourage a healthy competition among similar Departments and the overall improvement of education. Transfers between Departments should be limited only to those students who meet each Department’s standards.

Examinations should be limited to a finite number. This would encourage both students and teaching staff to take examinations seriously. It would also affect both the teaching standards and the intensity and quality of the educational experience. In order for this to be effective and fair, however, it should be implemented in combination with midterm exams, class assignments, term papers and in-class presentations. Most importantly, a serious effort should be made so that the entire culture and orientation of the teaching program gears towards more participatory and continuous learning. Students should be encouraged to “learn how to learn” and acquire skills on how to identify and solve problems using the scientific method.

Students should also be involved in contacting elementary research and writing reports from the early stages of their studies. This is an essential skill that, normally, needs time to develop and should not be postponed to the very end of the program with the writing of the thesis. This kind of an involvement would also provide students with a better understanding of the material, would improve their writing and analytical skills as well as the quality of the thesis.

The use of material outside (and beyond) the available textbooks and “notes” is strongly encouraged. This should be implemented through class lectures as well as through the writing of term papers and other class assignments.

The repeated examinations are a huge impediment to the educational process’ focus on learning. The EEC recognizes that it is very difficult to turn the student focus away from exams and towards learning. However, the process of routine and repeated examinations – almost *ad infinitum* – tends to transform the educational experience into an examination process. This needs to be addressed. As mentioned previously, the EEC believes that students should be allowed only a finite number of examinations for each course. For this to be successful, however, it must be implemented with a careful re-design of the curriculum and the use of alternative and auxiliary means of evaluations, such as midterm exams, term papers and assignments.

For the proposed system to be effective, it is also necessary to complement the careful implementation of teachers' evaluations with a system of continuous moderation of the exams. Following international norms, moderation could be performed on a sample of examinations by other members of the Department. While this sounds like (and probably is) a time consuming proposition, it has the potential to be a significant contributor to the enhancement of the overall educational experience in the Department.

### C. *Research*

#### APPROACH

The EEC has noticed the absence of a specific research vision, policy and strategy in the Department and this is confirmed by the Internal Evaluation Report (p. 32). The EEC was unable to identify any specific standards in relation to numerous research issues and this will be further elaborated in the following sections. On a positive note, the EEC identified a good research culture with junior faculty and PhD students who are enthusiastic and motivated.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

The Department tries to promote research but it admits that it has not been successful (p.32 of the Internal Evaluation Report). For example, the EEC noticed the absence of specific procedures for supporting and promoting the attendance of conferences. Also, the EEC believes that although the facilities are satisfactory for conducting research, there are no clear mechanisms for achieving this. Research is conducted in an *ad hoc* manner where faculty members design and implement their own, independent research agenda.

The absence of these mechanisms has a negative impact on outputs especially on the number of scientific publications. The absence of these mechanisms has had no adverse impact on being successful to many research projects funded by various bodies. These projects encourage external research collaborations and are a testament to this.

The EEC believes that more internal discussion and collaboration should take place between the faculty members of the Department. The Department should engage further with undergraduate and post-graduate students, the private sector and other stakeholders within its research endeavors for issues related to research projects and dissemination of scientific results.

#### RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, the EEC noted the absence of a research policy and strategy. Subsequently, the EEC could not identify any objectives aligned to a research policy and strategy and this needs to be addressed by the planning and implementation of the above (including the formation of a research vision and standards).

In terms of scientific publications, the EEC believes that the Departmental productivity is not satisfactory (46 journal papers in the ISI list in the examined time period 2004-08, p.35 of Internal Evaluation Report) considering the number of staff members and their seniority.

The research output tends to be concentrated on few faculty members. These productive individuals could play a key role in mentoring and engaging their colleagues. This could create a more productive research culture in the Department and intensify efforts for working towards high quality publications.

The Department has been successful in securing a large number of research projects from various national and international scientific bodies. The EEC believes that these research projects could provide a solid platform for the generation of significant research output and the creation of an intellectually stimulating research culture in the Department.

A healthy research culture could also be supported through the allocation of (at least some) project overheads to research-related activities and the reward of the faculty who generated them. The rest could be used for the research support of junior faculty members.

The EEC could not identify the creation of any patents emanating from work undertaken in the Department. However, faculty members have been members of various scientific and non-scientific bodies. The research of the Department is oriented largely towards collaborating with other Departments and/or other Research Centres within the Agricultural University of Athens. Nevertheless, ample initiatives were noted where the Department collaborates with other research units at national and international levels and the EEC believes that these types of collaboration should intensify.

Finally, the Department has not been the recipient of any scientific awards and prizes.

#### IMPROVEMENT

The EEC recommends the following steps aimed at strengthening the research environment and culture within the Department:

Specific research vision, policy, strategy and standards should be formed and implemented to improve research productivity and enhance the quantity and quality of the research output. This policy and strategy should support junior faculty members and establish transparent standards for promotion and tenure.

Related to the previous matter is the element of mentoring where productive senior faculty members should support, motivate, encourage and, when possible, collaborate with their junior colleagues.

The internal academic dialogue could be further supported by the creation of fortnightly/monthly research seminars where faculty members and Ph.D. students will present their research.

Part of the research strategy should focus on the provision of incentives for the professional growth and development of faculty members. This can be accomplished through the encouragement of sabbatical leaves and the attendance of research conferences and workshops.

The EEC also suggests that some research project overheads managed by ELKE should be channelled to junior faculty members and the funding of research activities like workshop and conference participation. Of course, the majority of these funds should be directed to the faculty responsible for their generation.

A good opportunity for a further increase in output emanates from the research projects. The EEC believes that staff members working in research projects should intensify their efforts to move the research output to publication in high quality peer-reviewed outlets.

Finally, the Department should facilitate collaborations between the faculty and its (undergraduate and post-graduate) students, the private sector and other stakeholders. This can take place within, *inter alia*, research projects and the dissemination of research results.

#### **D. All other services**

##### APPROACH

The members of the Department find the quality of facilities and level of support services to be, generally, adequate. While the EEC is in agreement with that, it did observe the existence of significant constraints to handicap access to most all Departmental facilities, a significant reliance on paper communication with the upper administration and other academic units on campus as well as with outside constituents. In

addition, the EEC was informed of the library's closing during evenings and weekends as well as of the, almost complete, lack of meeting places for undergraduate student group study and socializing activities.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Given the size of the Department and its undergraduate and post-graduate student body, the administrative staff can only marginally cover the needs of the Department. Streamlining the communication process could free up time and resources that could be used in more productive activities.

The library is state-of-the-art, equipped with PCs, free wireless service, study space and online access for eligible users. There is a reasonably well-equipped gym and some athletic courts. There is also a counseling office for students with special needs.

## RESULTS

The EEC was impressed by the quality of the office space and facilities available to Departmental faculty and staff. As pointed out above, however, the library is closed during evenings and weekends which is basically the time undergraduate students are freed up from course and laboratory participation.

In addition, athletic courts available to the campus community appear in dire need of some major repairs.

Finally, the EEC noted, with regret, the University's inability to enforce the law and provide a smoke-free environment inside its buildings.

## IMPROVEMENT

The Departmental services could be further improved through an increased reliance on electronic communication both with members of the Department and outside groups (when feasible), access to the library after (the current closing time of) 4pm and during weekends, and creation of inviting meeting places to enhance the undergraduate student presence on campus.

### Relationship with social, cultural and production organizations

According to the Internal Evaluation Report, the Department has been active at a local, regional, national and international level. More specifically, there are contributions to activities of various Ministries, city agencies, professional chambers, environmental groups, the organization of cultural activities, the management of the Agricultural Museum and the participation in the University's Music Laboratory.

Members of the Department have also participated in EU committees, program evaluations, association boards, international conference scientific committees and the editorial boards of international journals.

It is important to note, however, that, with the exception of the post-graduate programs that invite speakers from production organizations on a fairly regular basis, the Department has limited interaction with interest groups (such as private agribusiness firms, food retailers, cooperatives and consumer groups) that could benefit from, and provide a benefit to, the Departmental research and other activities. Such an interaction could also improve the Department's role in shaping policy and making meaningful social contributions.

The limited interaction with the various participants of the agri-food system has been attributed to an alleged fierce student opposition to University's relationships with "the market." While the EEC does not dispute this alleged opposition, it did note that the majority of the relatively small groups of (undergraduate and post-graduate) students that chose to meet with the EEC expressed a strong desire for opportunities for interaction with potential future employers and more organized and meaningful experience as part of their required internship.

The EEC strongly supports the development and cultivation of such relationships as highly beneficial to all parties involved.

***E. Strategic planning, perspectives for improvement and potential inhibiting factors.***

The Department's Internal Evaluation Report indicates the following positive actions:

- Plans to introduce formal advising and mentoring for the Department's undergraduate students.
- Plans to review and change the program of studies to reduce the average length of studies, avoid unnecessary overlaps, enrich the curriculum with new relevant subject matters, and reduce the number of students that transfer from other programs (by reducing the similarities with these other programs).
- Desires to attract highly qualified faculty through meritocratic procedures.
- Plans to address the "identity crisis" of their graduates through the increase in field courses so that students are trained as (and feel like) Agricultural Economists with knowledge of other agricultural sciences.
- Desires to pursue its administrative and scientific independence as well as its transformation to an Applied Economics Department of the Agricultural University of Athens.

The ways the Department purports to pursue its strategic goals and objectives are outlined on pp. 51-52 of the Internal Evaluation Report and are not replicated here.

## ***F. Final Conclusions and Recommendations of the EEC***

### **Curriculum**

#### **Undergraduate**

- The EEC feels that the required coursework in the current program of studies is overly excessive and could be a contributing factor to the
  - the extremely long (and increasing) average length of studies of students specializing in Agricultural Economics and Rural Development
  - extremely low success rate of students during their first and second attempts at passing a course
  - very low grade point average of graduating students.
- The EEC also feels that the share of elective courses in the undergraduate program of studies is miniscule making the tailoring of the educational experience to the student interests and needs impossible.
- The EEC also feels that the share of agricultural economics- and rural development-related courses in the program of studies of the (Agricultural Economics and Rural Development) Department is very small and insufficient in adequately preparing students to effectively address the important agricultural economics and rural development challenges they are supposed to be able to tackle upon graduation. On the other hand, the number of courses from sister disciplines (like Plant Sciences, Food Science, Animal Science, Horticulture and Agricultural Engineering) the students are required to take is excessive making their specialization title inconsistent with their actual skills.
- Given the above, the EEC strongly recommends:
  - The reduction in the total number of courses in the curriculum
  - The significant increase in the share of electives in the overall program of studies
  - The reduction in the years of study of the undergraduate program from the current five (5) to four (4) years of study
  - The increase in the share of the disciplinary courses required for the award of the degree by the Department
  - The new 4-year curriculum should consist of, at least, 5/8 of disciplinary courses with the remaining 3/8 being other agricultural and basic science courses the students could elect based on their individual academic and/or professional interests (with guidance and advice from their academic advisor).
- 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 very high length of studies and the low grade point average of students. The success of such policy would necessitate the establishment of a Departmental committee responsible for its implementation and moderation of the exams.
- Finally, the EEC suggests the enrichment of the curriculum with important new courses (like Behavioral Economics, Ecological Economics, Food Economics & Policy, Industrial Organization, Institutional Economics, New International Economics, and Water Economics & Policy) that are highly relevant in the increasingly industrialized agri-food system and currently missing from the Departmental curriculum.

#### **Post-Graduate**

- The EEC recommends that students are given the option to select courses across the two post-graduate programs of the Department.
- The EEC also suggests that the Department offers crash courses before the formal start of the programs for students with a weaker background in economics, mathematics and/or statistics.

### **Teaching**

- The EEC strongly recommends the implementation of teaching methods that will foster greater student participation in the process of learning and increase class attendance.
- In addition to promoting a more meaningful educational experience, increased student attendance would also facilitate the use of assignments and midterm examinations which were deemed desirable both by faculty and the majority of students the EEC interacted with during the evaluation process.
- 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 also improve dramatically the quality of students' undergraduate thesis.
- Increased attendance would also go long ways 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 teaching experience could also be enhanced through the wide use of up-to-date teaching material. While the EEC did not have the opportunity to examine all the books and notes made available to students, a number of students complained that a large part of the teaching material used is dated. Whether this is the case or not, the EEC recommends the development of a quality control mechanism both for the course content and the teaching material used.
- The EEC also recommends the establishment of a limit in the number of examinations the student is allowed to participate. Such a limit should be accompanied by a system of continuous moderation of the Departmental examinations.
- Finally, the EEC suggests that the Department should make an effort to recognize and reward its most effective teachers and encourage and support the student participation in the Erasmus program.

### **Research**

- The EEC notes and applauds the significant grant activity of some faculty members. The EEC also notes the weak relationship between the number of projects and the research output of the Unit and recommends that measures are taken to encourage the communication of research findings to academia and the stakeholder groups involved.
- The EEC finds the average research productivity of the Department to be very low. Perhaps more alarming is the fact that the distribution of research productivity is highly skewed with a small share of the faculty accounting for the vast majority of the Department's research output.
- Encouragement of faculty re-tooling through sabbatical leaves, participation in seminars and workshops and collaboration with more active colleagues could assist in enhancing the Departmental productivity.
- The faculty is also encouraged to make an effort to disseminate the research findings through high quality publication outlets. In addition to enhancing the impact of its research findings, publication in mainstream field journals like the American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Land Economics, Journal of Environmental Economics and Management, Journal of Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Economics, European Review of Agricultural Economics, and Food Policy will bolster the relevance and reputation of the Department.
- The EEC suggests the development of a Departmental research policy that will clearly lay out the Unit's expectations regarding the research endeavors of its members. The determination and clear communication of the Department's research policy and quality standards associated with hiring, promotion and tenure decisions are critical for the Department's relevance, development and success.
- The EEC also feels that the Department should strongly encourage and support the professional development and growth of its junior faculty members. A way to do that could be through the effective mentoring by active senior faculty members as well as through the allocation of some ELKE funds to small research grants, equipment and travel grants.

- Finally, the Department should also make an effort to recognize and reward its more active faculty members, increase the student involvement in the research projects of the Department, and develop an active research seminar series.

**Other**

- The EEC feels that the Department needs to be more proactive in the relationship with its constituents, in general, and the private sector, in particular, extending its research findings and communicating its willingness and, where appropriate, its ability to address important current and emerging issues of relevance 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.
- Finally, the EEC would like to commend the senior members of the Department for their efforts and success in attracting and hiring some very promising junior faculty members in recent years. A continuous focus on attracting bright young scholars and the establishment of meritocratic hiring and promotion procedures could go long ways in facilitating the growth and development the Department should aspire to.

**Concluding Remark**

Before concluding its evaluation report, the EEC would like to point out that it very much enjoyed its interaction with the faculty, staff and students of the Department and hopes that those involved will find its comments and suggestions useful in their quest to continuously improve this important component of the Agricultural University of Athens.

With Best Wishes,

The EEC

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