NECHE
New England Commission of Higher Education

December 20, 2023

Dr. Margee Ensign
President
American University in Bulgaria
1 Georgi Izmirliev Square
Blagoevgrad, 2700, Bulgaria

Dear President Ensign:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on November 16, 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the information submitted by American University in Bulgaria and took the following action:

that the information submitted by American University in Bulgaria be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2026 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, as well as the matters specified in our letters of April 28, 2021 and October 10, 2023, the institution give emphasis, in the Spring 2026 self-study, to the University's progress in initiating its plans to develop new graduate programs that will be offered 50% or more online as well as its continued success in implementing its current distance education offerings.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The information submitted by American University in Bulgaria was accepted because it was responsive to the request made by the Commission in its letter of October 10, 2023.

The Commission thanks American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) for submitting a report that provides additional information regarding the institution's progress in implementing its distance education offerings. We appreciate learning that "significant changes in leadership" during AY2023 made it necessary for the institution to shift its focus from distance education to "other strategic priorities." We understand that, for the foreseeable future, the delivery of full or partially online courses will be limited to no more than 10% to 15% of the institution's current course offerings, and online courses will be scheduled only in circumstances when students are "otherwise unavailable" to attend in-person, or "when faculty and students run into unexpected obstacles … such as visa problems for international faculty or medical conditions." We also note that AUBG plans to develop "at least" two new graduate degree programs over the next five years that will likely be offered 50% or more online. Through its report, AUBG assures the Commission that the delivery of online courses has been "very successful," even though, as the University candidly shares in its report, the results

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of a recent student survey indicate there was "a slight dip in the satisfaction with online courses in Spring 2023," primarily because the same instructor taught three sections of a Management course, and another faculty member was not well-suited to teach in the online environment.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2026 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. In addition to the information included in all self-studies and the items specified for attention in the Commission's letters of April 28, 2021 and October 10, 2023, the University is asked, in Spring 2026, to report on a matter related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation; The Academic Program; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; Institutional Resources;* and *Educational Effectiveness.*

While we acknowledge that American University in Bulgaria currently delivers a small subset of its courses (10% to 15%) in an online format, we are also cognizant that the University plans to develop new graduate programs that will be offered 50% or more online. We are further aware that enhancing institutional capacity to maintain high academic quality in the delivery of its online programming will require the institution's sustained attention over time. Therefore, we look forward, in the self-study submitted in advance of the Spring 2026 comprehensive evaluation, to receiving an update on AUBG's plans to expand its distance education offerings as evidence that it "has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5). To confirm that AUBG has the "capacity to undertake and sustain [its plans for distance education] and to assure that the new academic programming meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards and policies" (4.8), the Commission will also be eager to receive, in Spring 2026, verification to support the University's claim that its online courses "have been very successful." For example, in addition to demonstrating that the rigor and content of online courses is appropriate for the degree level and consistent with courses delivered in a face-to-face format, the Spring 2026 self-study will also provide an opportunity for AUBG to include evidence that faculty teaching online courses are appropriately qualified and sufficient in number; that course materials are easily accessible and sufficient for both students and faculty; that online students have ample opportunity to engage with faculty; and that both direct and indirect methods of assessment are used to evaluate student learning outcomes. Our standards on *The Academic Program; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; Institutional Resources;* and *Educational Effectiveness* will further inform this portion of the self-study:

> Through its system of academic administration and faculty participation, the institution demonstrates an effective system of academic oversight, assuring the quality of the academic program wherever and however it is offered (4.5).
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> The institution offers an array of student services, including physical and mental health services, appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees (5.9).
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> The preparation and qualifications of all faculty and academic staff are appropriate to the nature of their assignments. Qualifications are measured by advanced degrees held, evidence of scholarship, advanced study, creative activities, and teaching abilities, as well as relevant professional experience, training, and credentials (6.3).
>
> The institution endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning wherever and however courses and programs are offered. It encourages experimentation to improve instruction. The effectiveness of instruction is regularly and systematically assessed using valid procedures; the results are used to improve instruction. Faculty and academic staff

accept their responsibility to improve instructional effectiveness. Adequate support is provided to accomplish this task (6.17).

The institution has sufficient and appropriate information, physical, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes wherever and however its academic programs are offered. It devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technological resources (7.21).

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment. The institution ensures that information about student success is easily accessible on its website (8.6).

The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its institutional and program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students (8.10).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the additional information submitted by American University of Bulgaria and hopes that its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Michael D. Marvin. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Russell C. Carey

RCC/jm

cc: Mr. Michael D. Marvin

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions