

# Frozen out

Universities in Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus are stuck in a political twilight zone, **Eleni Courea** reports.

Nestled in the south-eastern corner of the EU is a state-of-the-art university reminiscent of an American college campus. The Eastern Mediterranean University in Cyprus has sprawling green lawns and a modern building complex that houses 11 faculties and 18,000 students, each enrolled in one of the university's 95 undergraduate and 77 postgraduate courses.

And yet something is not quite right.

"We cannot lead proposals for the EU's Horizon 2020 programme", says Mustafa Tümer, a business researcher at the EMU. "It's a great problem for us."

Ahmet Rizaner, an IT researcher at the EMU, agrees: "Finding external funding for research is quite difficult, and international collaborations are not very common."

The EMU is located in Famagusta, northern Cyprus, an area that has been under Turkish control since 1974. Around a third of Cypriot territory is administered by the government of this Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Its economy is heavily dependent on cash injections from Ankara and its security is guarded by 30,000 Turkish troops.

The TRNC government is recognised only by Turkey, while the rest of the world recognises the government of the Republic of Cyprus—which controls two-thirds of the country's territory—as the only legitimate authority on the island. The north is shunned entirely by the otherwise omnipresent harbingers of globalisation—global franchises such as Starbucks and McDonald's—as well as world leaders and superstar celebrities. Jennifer Lopez backed out of a concert she had scheduled in northern Cyprus in 2010 after she was criticised for apparently legitimising an illegal state.

The setup causes inevitable problems for higher education in northern Cyprus. The state-funded EMU is not alone in the twilight zone: 13 private universities have popped up in the north since 1985. Near East University, the biggest among them, is based in Nicosia and boasts a student population of 27,000. The majority are Turkish or Turkish Cypriot, but a growing proportion of students come from countries in Africa and the Middle East.

"Because of political reasons we cannot apply as an independent university for EU funding, but we can join other universities' proposals as co-partners," says Murat Tuzunkan, a NEU trustee. Hence both the NEU and the EMU have indirectly benefited from EU funds. They are each engaged in around 150 collaborations with uni-

versities abroad, including in Europe, and the EMU runs two joint masters programmes in engineering with the University of Warwick. Both have secured membership of the European University Association and the International Association of Universities, opening the door to more international exposure than other universities in northern Cyprus receive.

The very existence of these universities is anathema to the government of the Republic of Cyprus. A foreign ministry position paper decries the "unlawfully operating 'educational institutions' as well as the 'qualifications' they award". It also emphasises that their direct or indirect recognition is at odds with EU policies on higher education—for which a prerequisite is "cooperation on a national level or with nationally recognised institutions".

Rizaner, Tümer and Tuzunkan all laugh at the idea of universities in the north collaborating with those in the Republic of Cyprus. "But researchers can attend the conferences or seminars organised by the universities in the south," Rizaner says, and they frequently do so in a personal capacity.

Cypriot government officials follow EMU conferences and outreach activities, and contact potential participants to inform them that the university is operating illegally, according to Tümer. "A few years ago I organised a conference where the director of the European Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship was going to speak," Tümer says. "But the Cypriot high commissioner to the UK went to his office and told him not to go. So the director called me and cancelled."

There is not much hope for the EMU, NEU or other universities in Turkish-controlled Cyprus to raise their profile under the current setup. Full recognition by the EU and inclusion in its Framework programmes is a forlorn dream. As an alternative, TRNC-based researchers often apply for funding from Turkey's research council.

In the meantime, all eyes are on the ongoing negotiations between Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, seen by many as a last chance to reunify the island and prevent Europe's most intractable political deadlock from ending in partition.

"Reunification will have a positive impact on the EMU," says Tümer. "We are ready for competition—our programmes are accredited by institutions across Europe." And Tuzunkan says reunification would "provide an opportunity for NEU to show what it can do all over the world".

But for Tuzunkan it's a question of responsibilities as well as rewards: "Universities should play an active role in this reunification process—we have to build trust and confidence between the two communities." *Something to add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

'Full inclusion in the EU Framework programme is a forlorn dream.'