

**Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS**  
**on the Institutional Accreditation of the College of Arts and Social**  
**Sciences (CASS)**  
**at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman**

**Based on the report of the expert panel, the comments of the university and the discussions of the Accreditation Commission, the Commission decides on 27 July 2016:**

1. The **College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS)** at the Sultan Qaboos University (Oman) is accredited according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The accreditation is **conditional**.

2. The College of Arts and Social Sciences complies with the requirements defined by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The required adjustments should be processed within a time period of nine months.
3. The conditions have to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions has to be documented and reported to AQAS no later than **30 April 2017**.
4. The institutional accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **30 September 2022**.

Condition:

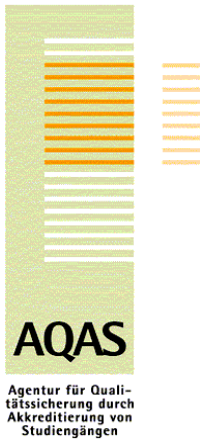
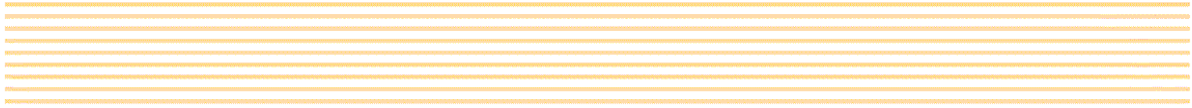
1. The role of the students as internal stakeholders of the college must be strengthened. Students must be involved as “co-producers of quality measures” with reference to strategy and targets, teaching and learning, community learning and resources and facilities. CASS must define the role of the students within its QA system and procedures.

In order to further develop the quality assurance system the Accreditation Commission makes the following recommendations.

1. CASS (with support of SQU) should prepare an action plan for its internationalisation to clarify how the internationalisation of staff and students can be improved. CASS should monitor the results of the measures taken to strengthen the mobility of students.

2. The college should develop programme-specific entry requirements for its programmes depending on the nature of the programme and its medium of instruction.
3. The policy and the approach to strengthen the autonomy of the learner should be made more explicit.
4. Supported by the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning CASS should further strengthen the aspect of innovative teaching and learning methods in order to fully achieve CASS's mission.
5. CASS should develop a research profile which goes beyond the numeration of research interests of individual academics or small groups of academics. Academic staff should be encouraged to enhance their teaching by incorporating their research output into their classes where applicable/possible.
6. CASS should put down its standards towards academic freedom which could also be helpful for international cooperation.
7. CASS should develop a long-term succession plan to increase the number of Omani recruits.

With regard to the reasons for this decision the Accreditation Commission refers to the attached assessment report.



## Report for

### Institutional Accreditation of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman

Site Visit on 10 to 12 of April 2016

#### Panel of Experts:

<b>Prof. Dr. Dieter Timmermann</b>	President of the German Student Service, Germany (Chairman)
<b>Dr. Hala Obaid</b>	National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training, Bahrain
<b>Magnús Diðrik Baldursson</b>	Head of Quality Administration and Managing Director of the Rector's Office, University of Iceland, Iceland
<b>Prof. Dr. Christoph Schmidt</b>	Head of Deutsche Welle Academy Administration and Academic Department, Germany (representative of the labour market)
<b>Christopher Bohlens</b>	University of Luneburg, B.Sc. Economics and Political Sciences, Germany (student representative)

#### Coordination:

<b>Doris Herrmann</b>	AQAS, Cologne
<b>Ronny Heintze</b>	AQAS, Cologne

## **I. Preamble**

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### *Introducing AQAS*

AQAS – Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – is an independent non-profit organisation, supported by more than 85 member institutions, both higher education institutions (HEIs) and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been accredited by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is therefore a notified body for accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany.

AQAS understands itself as an institution founded by and working for higher education institutions and academic associations. The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of both academic studies and teaching in higher education institutions. The activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither restrained to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor to a certain type of higher education institution

Based on the experiences and the expertise AQAS gained in the field of external quality assurance in the last years the agency was asked to carry out comparable external QA procedures abroad. AQAS is a full member of ENQA and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that our procedures comply with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe.

While the criteria and procedure for accreditation in Germany are defined by GAC, the agency uses the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), on which all Bologna countries agreed, as a basis for accreditation procedures abroad. The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The core idea of an institutional accreditation by AQAS is to check if the quality assurance system of a university/faculty/college is in line with the ESG (version 2015).

## **II. Accreditation procedure**

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### *Approach and methodology*

Based on the ESG, AQAS developed a set of criteria and indicators relevant to an institutional accreditation. For the accreditation of programmes separate indicators have been developed. On the basis of the accreditation criteria, AQAS drew up guidelines for writing a self-evaluation report (SER). The accreditation commission for system accreditation of AQAS agreed on the use of both documents for this procedure.

The ESG are not prescriptive but they provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education.

“The ESG are based on the following four principles for quality assurance:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.” (ESG 2015, p. 6)

The focus of an ESG based institutional accreditation is put on the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, core processes which exist to secure a high level of the learning process will be checked. AQAS follows the main idea that an external assessment should involve the evaluation of sufficiency of mechanisms that an institution chose to secure the quality of its programmes. Of course, individual targets set by the institution in the SER have an impact on the judgement of the panel of experts. In the accreditation procedure the experts try to assess whether the institution is able to achieve these targets.

*The accreditation procedure followed the standardized procedure of AQAS:*

In April 2015, representatives of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at Sultan Qaboos University visited the AQAS office in Cologne for an initial consultation which covered information on the accreditation procedure, on the requirements for the SER as well as on the assessment criteria.

The university executive mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in October 2015.

In November 2015, AQAS carried out a workshop for different stakeholders of CASS in Mascat (Oman) in order to inform all persons involved about the ESG, guidelines and criteria, and the accreditation procedure in its different phases. The aim of the workshop was to familiarize staff members of SQU with the European approach of an accreditation procedure, to enable them to contribute to the SER and to take part in the site visit on the basis of the same information.

*Internal Phase/ Basis for the judgement of the panel of experts*

In December 2015, CASS handed in a draft of the SER based on guidelines which had been developed by AQAS. The SER describes the main characteristics of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), explains how the quality management system works and how learning and teaching is organised. Instead of an appendix CASS integrated different links into the SER to provide detailed material, to give evidence of the statements of the self-report and to show how procedures are functioning.

The appendix included e.g.:

- Overview over statistical data of the student body (e.g. number of applications, beginners, students, graduates, student drop outs).
- Annual Performance Report of CASS 2013/2014
- CVs of the teaching staff of CASS
- Information on the research centres of SQU
- Information on student services of SQU
- Information on central centres of SQU, e.g. Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- Core information on the main library
- Academic roadmap to accreditation
- Undergraduate/graduate academic regulations

CASS offered access to a wide range of different information to the panel of experts.

AQAS checked this application for sufficiency regarding completeness, comprehensibility and transparency. The final version of the SER was handed in March 2016.

#### *External phase/panel of experts*

AQAS carries out accreditation procedures based on a peer-review principle. Due to the fact that this agency is involved in different European networks, AQAS feels obliged to act according to the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts (Dublin, 2005).

The composition of the panel of experts follows the basic principles of the German regulations for institutional accreditation (“system accreditation”) that it consists of one expert from university management, one professor from one of the disciplines, one expert for quality assurance, one representative from the labour market and one student.

The panel of experts had been nominated by the AQAS accreditation commission for institutional accreditation (AK Sys) in December 2015:

Prof. Dr. Dieter Timmermann, President of the German Student Service and Professor for Economics of Education, Germany (Chairman)

Dr. Hala Obaid, National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training, Bahrain; Assistant Professor University of Bahrain

Magnús Diðrik Baldursson, Head of Quality Administration and Managing Director of the Rector’s Office, University of Iceland

Prof. Dr. Christoph Schmidt, Head of Deutsche Welle Academy, Germany (representative of the labour market)

Christopher Bohlens, University of Luneburg, Germany (student representative)

AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and CASS did not raise any objections.

AQAS’ commission for institutional accreditation officially initiated the accreditation procedure on 15 February 2016. AQAS informed the university about the date for the site visit and suggested a schedule for the visit.

The experts reviewed the application and submitted a short preliminary statement including open questions and potential needs for additional information. AQAS forwarded these preliminary statements to the university and the panel members in order to increase transparency in the process and the upcoming discussions during the site visit.

During the three days of the site visit discussions were held with the university management, the head(s) of college and departments, the central QA unit, the programme coordinators, lecturers as well as with graduates and students. At the end of the site visit the panel of experts gave a short feedback on the main findings to representatives of CASS.

After the site visit CASS handed in some additional information on the programme of “Tourism” and “Archeology” because the panel of experts wishes to cross check these programmes.

### *Final phase of the accreditation procedures*

*May 2016*

The expert panel wrote an assessment report including a recommendation to the Accreditation Commission for institutional accreditation (AK Sys) which eventually decides on the accreditation result.

*June 2016*

AQAS forwarded the report without the recommendation to the university in order to grant the opportunity to hand in a statement on the report.

*July 2016*

Based on the report of the expert panel and the statement of the university, the Accreditation Commission took its decision on the accreditation. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

*September 2016*

AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel of experts. The accreditation confirms that the institution/college operates in accordance with the AQAS criteria and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

## **III. General Information**

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### **A. Information on Sultan Qaboos University**

The Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is the only public university in the Sultanate of Oman. In line with the national education strategy 2040, SQU has prepared a long-term strategic plan (2016-2040) to implement its vision “to continue its national leading role in higher education and community service and also to be internationally recognized for innovative research, the quality of its graduates, and strategic partnerships.” Among the main goals of the long-term strategic plan (2016-2040) are the following: Producing quality graduates able to pursue successful careers and provide solutions for societal needs; Conducting internationally-recognised research of impact on the socio-economic development of the country; Transforming knowledge into value through a vibrant innovation system and creating effective partnerships with the community. To ensure the realisation of the university’s vision, five consecutive medium-term operational plans were developed for all units of the university.

SQU commenced in 1986 with five colleges, namely Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science. The College of Arts and Social Sciences was established in 1987. Today, SQU offers 64 undergraduate programmes and 96 postgraduate programmes (34 doctoral and 62 masters’).

Research is one of the core functions of SQU. The university has established ten research centres in different areas. The total number of research projects undertaken up to 2014 was 1,810 (including conference papers).

The university currently has 17,824 registered students of whom 9,359 are female and 8,465 are male. 91% of the total student body are enrolled in Bachelor degree programmes. Most

students entering the university are selected on the basis of their performance in high school final examinations. Furthermore, student admission is based on gender balance. As SQU sees its major task in building national capacity in different fields, the number of international students is limited; however, students originate from 34 nationalities/different countries.

The total number of SQU employees was 6,186 in January 2015. The university has attracted staff from various cultural backgrounds (covering 68 countries).

Since its inception in 1986, SQU has adopted quality assurance policies. The university's programmes have been evaluated over the last 20 years with the help of the following mechanisms: major institutional evaluation by teams of international experts (most recently in 2009); annual evaluation of academic programmes by external examiners since 1990; national/international accreditation of some of the academic programmes.

At the central level, the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) has been established in 2010. The mission of the QAO at SQU is to enhance the quality of academic, administrative, financial and technical performances and to reinforce the culture of quality in the university.

## **B. Information on the College of Arts and Social Sciences**

In its SER, the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at Sultan Qaboos University states that it aspires to become a leading regional and international centre of excellence in teaching, research and community service.

As formulated in its mission statement, CASS seeks to:

- provide students with opportunities to develop skills, capacities and creativity for personal and professional development through training;
- foster critical and effective communication skills that enable graduates to function productively in a wide range of employment domains and pursue postgraduate studies;
- cultivate a multicultural outlook and prepare students to deal with an increasingly complex globalised world;
- serve as a centre for innovation to increase the quality and quantity of interdisciplinary research;
- promote the education of arts and other forms of cultural artefacts; and
- reinforce strong and meaningful ties with Omani culture and heritage.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences comprises 12 departments offering 11 Bachelor programmes, 10 Masters programmes and 3 PhDs programmes. The Bachelor programmes of the Departments of Archaeology, Theatre and Philosophy have been suspended due to low employment rates of their graduates.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences enrolled 2,772 undergraduates in Fall 2015, which constituted the largest undergraduate enrolment number among the nine colleges of SQU. CASS has 182 academic staff members, 76% of whom have a PhD degree.

At the level of the college the following mechanisms are implemented to enhance research activities: research funds, conference attendance, research leave, sabbatical leave, research awards and journal publication awards. CASS publishes an academic journal and organises an international conference biennially.



## IV. ESG based evaluation of CASS

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### 1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance

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*Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders. [ESG, criterion 1.1]*

SQU adopted the Quality Assurance (QA) framework from the national accreditation organisation “OAAA” to implement its QA system and support its efforts in continuous quality improvement. To contextualise the OAAA framework, CASS developed quality indicators, processes and practices to address its institutional needs and relevance within Oman's higher education context. CASS used the following steps to implement the Total Quality Management system:

#### 1. *Establishment of QA and Accreditation Committee (QAAC)*

In October 2011, the QAAC was formed. QAAC comprises representatives from all academic programmes in CASS under the direct supervision of the Dean and Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies and Dean of CASS. The QAAC has a permanent office, rapporteur and staff to execute duties and administrative tasks. The committee is charged with developing quality indicators, practices and procedures. In the near future, the QAAC should get additional resources in order to better respond to the growth activities of QA.

#### 2. *Positive working environment*

During the last decade the numbers of academic and administrative staff and students have increased significantly. The extension of buildings is part of the five year operational plan 2016-2020. 100 postgraduate working station offices were opened in Fall 2015.

#### 3. *Creating effective teaching and learning environments*

In view of the important role that optimised teaching and learning environments can play in creating effective higher education institutions, the following best practices were implemented: A) Reduction of Full-Time Equivalency (FTE) and Staff-Student Ratio (SSR). To reduce both, a capped enrolment system was introduced in each course. B) An ambitious training plan for e-learning course designs was developed to foster the deployment of e-learning at CASS. C) Quality and effectiveness of course materials: in September 2012, QAAC developed, in consultation with academic staff, a common course portfolio template and online data warehouse for the production of these documents. D) In Fall 2015, CASS began to work on the unification of multi-section mid-term exams.

#### 4. *Listening to students' views and responding to their needs*

A student Liaison Committee was created in each department to listen to students' views. Starting Fall 2015, members of the College Student Liaison Committee attended the College Board to discuss students' academic issues.

#### 5. *Course assessment*

Course assessment aims at collecting student feedback on the quality of courses and teaching using the Course and Teaching Survey (CTS), which is organised university-wide during

weeks 12 and 13 of regular semesters. A scale is used to provide rating together with an open question in which the student may comment on any issue related to the course. The CTS is made available to students through an online form. Instructors receive a summary of the results for their courses as well as the open-ended comments. Comprehensive summaries are made available to the Head of Department (HoD), the Dean of the College and responsible persons at university level (e.g. Vice-Chancellor) to respond appropriately. Low performance cases are discussed with HoD to develop an improvement action plan.

#### 6. *Quality assurance culture*

The creation of a positive attitude toward quality is an important pillar of the Totally Quality Management (TQM). Several workshops and training programmes on quality assurance and academic accreditation were organised by CASS for students and academic staff. The executive plan of CASS' accreditation road map stipulated the creation of a benchmarking programme to help academic departments to streamline their QA processes, realign their organisational structure and create a QA culture that will help them to continuously monitor, evaluate and eventually improve their programmes.

#### 7. *Continuous improvement*

To effect QA implementation, the following best practices were implemented:

A) Self-evaluation and priority setting for quality improvement. The self-evaluation report is to be done every four years.

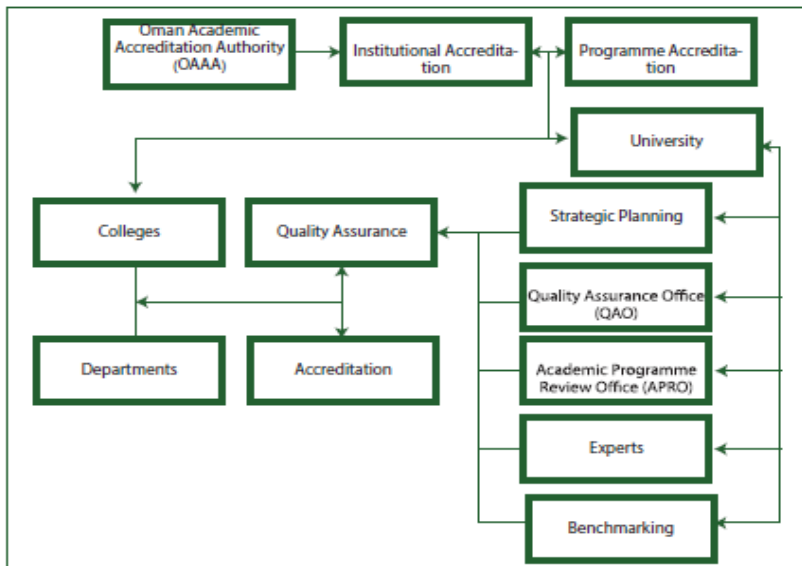
B) Establishment of Joint Committees with main stakeholders from government sectors. The college has joint committees with different ministries; their working groups facilitate frequent interaction between government and CASS to advance and encourage cooperation across a diverse range of areas, including environment, media, education and culture.

C) The college and all its academic programmes have an Advisory Committee composed of academic staff who teach in the respective programme and external stakeholders from the job market. The main role of these committees is to give advice about improving the employability of CASS graduates.

D) External Assessors and Accreditation: CASS collects external feedback about its academic programmes from external assessors. In Fall 2014, the QAAC developed a common template for external assessors to focus their feedback.

E) Accreditation: CASS' accreditation road map has also suggested the development of benchmarking departments to promote QA practices. The QAAC has selected reputable international accreditation agencies for its institutional and programmes accreditations.

The following figure shows the QA mechanisms and processes at SQU at the different levels of the university:



### Experts' Evaluation

SQU comprises a set of very strong and well developed characteristics which structure as well as lead the policy and politics of the nine colleges, which form the university. One dominant characteristic is the common passionate devotion to the quality of action and doing on the university level as well as on the college and department level, be it teaching and learning, research, service for society, facility services for the students and staff, human resource development and learning as well as working environments. The commitment of the university and of CASS to steadily develop the quality of their performances is not only reflected in frequent confessions for quality assurance and enhancement (in the Academic Accreditation Roadmap, the Self-Evaluation Report (SER), the Annual Performance Reports of the Colleges and other documents related to the institutional accreditation issue) but also by a number of actions and committees.

SQU (including CASS) has gone through institutional evaluations by international expert teams four times (1991, 1998, 2005 and 2009); it has always taken the results and recommendations very seriously and tried to transfer them into quality enhancing actions. Annual evaluations of academic programmes by external experts since 1990 provide further evidence of the university's commitment. A SWOT analysis was adopted to identify the institution's internal strengths and weaknesses, external opportunities and threats (Strategic Plan 2016 p. 1). The commitment of SQU and its colleges to quality assurance and enhancement is demonstrated by the statement that one of the major aims is to raise the university's academic performance to clear levels of excellence and to meet the nation's social and developmental needs amidst changing regional and international conditions.

#### *Interlinkage of QA on different levels of the university:*

Sultan Qaboos University created a comprehensive **three level Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (QAES)**. It means that institutions, structures and procedures have been erected on all three levels: the university, the college and the department. They are structurally connected by membership of persons on different levels as well as by clear allocation of tasks, procedures and responsibilities to institutions (committees and decision units

like head of departments, deans or vice-deans, academic council, university council and vice chancellor).

SQU and of course also CASS have adopted the **Quality Assurance Framework** of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), which was founded in 2010. This framework has been published recently (in January 2016). The panel of experts of AQAS had only a limited opportunity to look into one of the two copies of the QAAA handbook of nearly 200 pages while talking to members of the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) of SQU. However, the handbook impressed panel members due to the content of the book presenting a comprehensive as well as excellent understanding of quality assurance and enhancement.

SQU and CASS deploy target focused organizational units which take up specific tasks and responsibilities with respect to the **procedures of the quality cycle**. This has been confirmed in the talks to the internal stakeholders, i. e. by members of the teaching staff, by students as well as by members of the administrative and technical staff who are all involved in managing the quality cycle.

On the central level the **Quality Assurance Office (QAO)**, in coordination with all SQU units, aims to enhance the Continuous Quality Improvement Processes at the university, to spread the culture of quality improvement among staff and students and to achieve national accreditation in Oman and by international accreditation agencies; it seeks to improve the level of expertise and consultancies pertaining to quality and accreditation for all units of the university. Two noteworthy instruments of QAO are the Quality Assurance Forum and the Institutional and Programme Standards Assessment Seminar which are regularly held each year with academic staff members. A second organizational unit with a clear function in quality assurance on the central level is the Academic Program Review Office (APRO) whose task is to review all undergraduate academic programs at SQU.

#### *Activities on CASS level:*

CASS has followed SQU in developing and approving a **Strategic Plan 2016 - 2040** in accordance with a national higher education strategic plan. The SER exhibits a close concord between the vision, mission, objectives (as to expected learning outcomes, research performance, community services, cooperation with other academic institutions), core values and expected graduate attributes between the university level on the one side and CASS on the other. The dominant feature of what should be performed in the future is the quality attribute of all activities.

In preparing the **Academic Accreditation Roadmap**, CASS has practiced a very careful and serious style by exercising a participatory approach with respect to its 9 departments and its staff. Moreover, CASS sought consultation with experienced higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in order to learn from them.

The main responsibility for quality assurance lies at the department level, supported by initiatives on the college level, and both action spheres are intertwined. A **Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC)** was established on the college level in 2011, members are the Dean of the college and his or her Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies (ADUS) as well as the Heads of Departments (HoD). The HoD chairs the Department Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (DAAC) of his or her department. This DAAC is composed of department staff members. Each DAAC sends one Department Accreditation

Member (DAM) into the QAAC. The HoD serve as rapporteurs to the QAAC, and the QAAC has an officer who serves as a supervisor to the departments.

The role respective the participation of students in quality assurance is restricted to the recently introduced **Department Student Liaison Committees** (DSLCL) in each department, which are chaired by the Head of Department. The students have the opportunity to present their views on various topics or file a complaint to the HoD. The HoD has to submit a detailed report to the Dean of CASS including a clear action plan if requested by the students or deemed necessary by the HoD. Members of the DSLCL will be joining the College Student Liaison Committee (CSLCL). Starting in spring 2016, members of the CSLCL will be allowed to attend the College Board in order to present and discuss their academic issues.

CASS is offering high quality of teaching and service to its students which are both embedded into the quality assurance, quality assessment as well as quality enhancement system. CASS, thus, takes care of excellent teaching and improvement of teaching by listening to student' feedback via course questionnaires, discussions between students and teaching staff and the Students Liaison Committees in each department, where students can give feedback to the head of department and by means of the HoD to the College Dean resp. College Board. Students can now be present in the College Board and express their feedback and complaints in the board. Furthermore, the Advisor System as well as the Student Counselling Centre offer effective guidance service and consultancy to the students. The quality of teaching of the academic staff is monitored by the students' questionnaires and by oral feedback in discussions. The teaching staff of CASS can benefit from the services provided by several central centres of the university: the centre for Educational Technology, the Centre for Staff Development and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which the academic staff can – or sometimes must - use in order to improve their teaching ability. The centres regularly arrange workshops, seminars, consultancies and advice for the academic staff. The Annual Best Teacher Award also serves as an incentive to improve one's teaching competencies.

Although SQU as well as CASS assert a strong commitment towards student learning, service learning and **student orientation**, the extent to which students are invited to participate is too limited: students may engage in the DSLCL's and they may be heard in the College Board, but only as a kind of rapporteur whom is listened to. There is a need for strengthening the students' role in CASS as well as in SQU by giving them the right to participate in preparing innovative solutions in the planning phase of the quality cycle as well as in decision making on the department as well as on the college and university level. This means that the role of the students within the quality assurance, assessment and enhancement activities is not yet satisfactory. If participation of all stakeholders is taken seriously, as confirmed in the SER, student representatives should become regular (voting) members of the Department Quality Assurance and Assessment Committee, of the College Quality Assurance and Assessment Committee, of the Department Board and of the College Board.

Another part of the QA system of CASS refers to the **maintenance of the resources** that are necessary to run the programmes and the courses. A regular checking process (combined with respective responsibilities to personnel) of maintenance is established with respect to the physical space, the virtual space, the social space and the psychological space of the resources.

CASS exercises the **quality circle** nearly perfectly (the only critique of the panel of experts refers to the reduced role of the students). CASS runs a regular periodic review of its pro-

grammes every four years which leads to self-study reports. In case of deviations of the expected processes and results of a programme, the review period will be shortened. A self-study report is considered as a research report on the quality of the programme under review. It is aimed to be broad-based, reflective and forward-looking, and it includes critical analysis. It should include sufficient information to inform a reader who is unfamiliar with the programme about the process of quality assessment and evaluation and the evidence on which conclusions are based in order to have reasonable confidence that those conclusions are valid. The report should include all the necessary information for it to be read as a complete self-contained report on the quality of the programme. To ensure that all of the issues included in the academic programme review policy are addressed in the self-study report, programmes are required to submit the self-study report in a given template. Throughout the report evidence should be presented in tables or graphs to support conclusions; comparative data should be included where appropriate and references made to other reports or surveys with more detailed information.

The quality cycle which CASS has established follows the well known **phases of planning, doing, checking and acting**. In terms of the International Evaluation Program (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) CASS systematically works off the four decisive questions of quality assurance and enhancement. CASS gives clear answers to the following questions: 1. What is the institution trying to do? 2. How is the institution trying to do it? 3. How does the institution know that it works well? 4. How does the institution change in order to improve?

Questions number 1 and 2 are answered in the strategic plan as well as more precisely in the operational five year plan 2016 to 2020. The answers to question number 3 are acquired by the monitoring and checking system which CASS has developed. It consists of a number of characteristics. One characteristic is the deployment of internal as well as external observers respective constituents. Internal constituents are the students who regularly evaluate the quality of the courses as to content, methodical variety, preparation of the teaching personnel etc.. The results are passed on to the respective teaching academics, and feedback talks between the students and the academics take place during each semester. Condensed evaluation results go to the Head of Department, and in case of unfavourable judgements by the students the HoD can ask the academic in question to improve his or her teaching using the services of the Centre for Excellence of Teaching. CASS emphasizes a broad variety of teaching methods to be mastered by its academic teaching staff and offers training opportunities for staff members to improve their teaching competency towards learning outcomes, student orientation and variability of their teaching practice. Besides the students, faculty is also regularly asked to evaluate the programmes with respect to content structure, credit point distribution and the quality of the resources (e.g. IT, library facilities, rooms). The main focus of review is directed towards the learning outcomes in comparison with the educational objectives being defined in each curriculum for each module and course. The assessment of outcomes is achieved by looking at the course portfolios and by interviews of students and faculty. Recommendations drawn from the observations, interviews and control checks of the resources aim at two improvements: firstly at the improvement of the quality of the ingredients of teaching and learning as enabled by the courses and programmes, and secondly at the improvement of the procedures of outcome assessment.

This internal checking process is accompanied by an external feedback procedure by external constituents like advisors, employers, alumni and external assessors in the form of surveys and interviews. These external assessors do not only compare learning outcomes with

intended learning objectives, but they also evaluate the objectives themselves in order to recommend updates and alignments. Quality improvement suggestions and actions then focus on reviewing and updating educational objectives, on reviewing and updating programme outcomes in order to boost the achievement of educational objectives, and on improving the internal constituents.

The Quality Assurance Office collects data on the indicators which are used for assessment. The data is transferred to the Quality and Accreditation Committee of CASS and from there to the Quality and Accreditation Committees of the departments. The QA committees have developed the indicators and they decide how to evaluate the data and what steps are necessary to start a new quality enhancement cycle. At this point, the students should be involved in creating solutions for improvement.

Since the beginning, a participatory process has been accelerated which engages stakeholders at all levels. And indeed, as was expressed by students as well as staff who were interviewed by the panel of experts, the strategy as well as the practice of quality assurance at CASS is based on information, transparency and consensus-building. It was initially recognised that the participation of stakeholders is essential for the success of QM at CASS (and at SQU). That is why the university community is involved at all levels from the beginning of the strategy process including orientation and brainstorming sessions up to the multi-level drafting process. This participation practice has led to capacity-building to promote learning and consensus-building establishing a shared view. CASS has successfully managed to install internal information streams and an internal as well as external communication culture which is crucial for the functioning of QM. So it seems safe to conclude that the QA system of CASS does support the **development of a quality culture** in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching together with their quality assurance. This means e.g.:

- Strong evidence is available that internal stakeholders are involved in the QA system on different levels, external stakeholders are involved by means of advisory boards.
- Student experience provided by the student advisory group is used for the enhancement of the programme, but the role of the students in the QM system could be strengthened.
- The quality cycle (PDCA) is indeed completed, and the results of quality-assurance procedures lead to concrete measures to enhance quality.
- The QA system is structured in such a way that it supports the process of continuous enhancement and accountability of the institution.
- It is ensured that the different groups of stakeholders are informed about the strategy, procedures and outcomes of QA. Evaluation results are shared with teaching staff and students.
- CASS has a QA system based on defined strategies and procedures. The relevant procedures, instruments, and responsibilities are clear and comprehensible.

QA processes are **based** on quantitative and qualitative data and therefore enable the institution to come to objective evidence-based decision-making. The data is collected and published in the College Annual Performance Report. QAO has created a template which the colleges are asked to apply when preparing their annual performance report (CAPR). While the annual reports of CASS offer descriptions of each department regarding its history and development, undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD programs, the distribution of the aca-

demic, administrative and technical staff among the departments, the qualification profile of staff, the distribution of students by degrees and among departments, student-faculty ratios and FTE's, research output by funding sources and departments and finally community services by type of service and department, the College Annual Performance Report (CAPR) is directed towards the achievements in comparison with the objectives and actions aimed at in the strategic plan. The CAPR focuses on the strategic direction of the college and its alignment with the CASS mission and its objectives in the strategic plan. The report includes sections on internal evaluation of:

- College strategy and targets
- Teaching and learning
- Research and consultancy
- Community services
- Resources and facilities
- Risk management

During the site visit, QAO staff explained the QM system to the experts and outlined some of the **Key Performance Indicators** (KPI's) which are numerated in the following sections.

- To allow monitoring and evaluation to ensure the realisation of strategic goals with respect to undergraduate teaching and learning, a set of performance indicators is deployed. Some examples are: the number of new academic programmes that address labour market and stakeholders' needs, the measure of the level of satisfaction of stakeholders with the quantity and quality of graduates, the percentage of students who graduated within a specified time, the percentage of undergraduate students under academic probation, the percentage of graduates employed within 12 months of graduation, the percentage of newly introduced courses using e-learning, the full-time equivalent (FTE) student-faculty ratio, the measure of the level of graduates' satisfaction with the quality of teaching, the percentage of courses implementing outcome-based assessment, the number of nationally and internationally accredited academic programmes.
- In order to enable monitoring and evaluation and to ensure the realisation of strategic goals with respect to postgraduate programmes, a set of performance indicators is also applied. Examples are: the number of postgraduate students enrolled, the percentage of international students enrolled in postgraduate programmes, the number of postgraduate scholarships funded from external organisations, the number of evaluations of postgraduate programmes, the number of publications by postgraduate students.

CASS has implemented the following mechanisms in order to enhance its research activities:

- the university provides several research funds
- SQU encourages academic staff to participate in conferences, and provides them with full coverage for their participation.
- the university allocates research leave for academic staff who is engaged in a research projects (28 days per year) and allocates an annual sabbatical leave
- SQU operates annual Distinguished Researcher Awards to promote research activities.



- the university screens journal publications and gives awards on the basis of the results to academic staff
- CASS publishes an academic journal and biennially organizes an international conference.

To enable monitoring and evaluation of the research activities at CASS, a set of performance indicators is in use. Examples are: the number and value of funded research projects per year, the number of published refereed journal articles per faculty member per year, the number of refereed conference papers per faculty member per year, the number of citations per faculty member every five years, the ratio of externally acquired funds to total research funds, the number of staff engaged in externally funded research, the measure of the level of satisfaction of staff on the research management system, the percentage of successfully completed funded projects, the number of research awards granted to CASS faculty members.

CASS and SQU apply indicators which stand for their creativity and innovation capacity. Again, some examples are given:

- The number of workshops, seminars and invited lecturers to promote creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation,
- the number of introductory and specialized courses in creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation,
- the measure of the level of satisfaction of staff and students with respect to managing the innovation system,
- the number of patents registered,
- the number of start-up companies.

To allow for monitoring and evaluation of service learning respective community engagement, some examples out of the set of performance indicators are shown:

- the number of staff serving on national, regional and international committees,
- the number of stakeholders serving on university units advisory committees,
- the number of collaborative projects between CASS and public and private sectors,
- the number of active partnerships with industry and society at large,
- the number of staff and students involved in community service activities.

SQU and all colleges have developed a measure “Performance Index” of the decision-making process by relating the level of management satisfaction to staff/student satisfaction concerning the university respectively college performance. This is complemented by a measure of the level of stakeholders’ satisfaction with efficiency and effectiveness of university resp. college management, as well as by a measure “Transparency Index” which relates the university resp. college management’s belief of being transparent to staff/student satisfaction with transparency conduct. Finally, SQU has issued and published “Accountability Regulations” and it has developed a measure of the level of staff awareness of these regulations in all colleges.

Rules and Regulations for different aspects of the academic life are available at CASS. The panel of experts discussed the aspect of academic freedom openly with the academic staff and no restrictions were recognizable regarding this aspect. Nevertheless CASS should make its standards towards academic freedom more explicit and put it down in its regulations which could also be helpful for international cooperations.

The strategy for QA supports academic integrity and helps to avoid discrimination against students and staff. The university is committed to academic integrity as a core value, high-

lighting consequences of academic misconduct in the Undergraduate and in the Postgraduate Academic Regulations (UAR/ PAR). The university acknowledges that academic integrity is important to its reputation and credibility. The UAR / PAR define student misconduct in examinations, assignments and in forging documents. Plagiarism, copying, switching, collusion, falsification and impersonation are examples of misconduct. Penalties for academic misconduct range from admonition to expulsion from university. All procedures and acts of misconduct are documented. At the beginning of the academic year, plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are mentioned in the induction programme and students receive a copy of the UAR / PAR to familiarize them with the regulations. In 2008, the university began its subscription to the plagiarism detection software Turn-it-in, which has been deployed in all colleges. A number of awareness seminars and workshops are offered focusing on plagiarism, Turn-it-in software and intellectual property. Once an act of misconduct is discovered in CASS, it is documented; an ad hoc committee is appointed to investigate the incident and a report is submitted to the HoD, who takes appropriate action.

### **Findings:**

On the basis of the experts' evaluation, the following conclusions can be drawn:

At CASS, well defined structures and procedures of QM are in place, continuous quality enhancement is implemented, the quality cycle is complete and functions well. The visit showed that QA processes are data-driven and that strategic implications for decisions are evidence-based. The internal as well as external stakeholders are not only informed about the QA system, its processes and results but also involved as consultants and observers. Evaluation results are shared with the teaching staff and a set of measures is in place in order to meet necessities to act. The QA system of CASS supports scientific integrity; forms of discrimination were not detected. The college shows a highly developed level of awareness of discrimination. Moreover, all members of the college, be it the dean, the vice-dean, the heads of the departments, the academic staff, the students as well as the administrative and technical staff, they all showed a high degree of awareness towards the relevance of quality of their respective doing, that is, CASS (and SQU) has developed a quality culture, the university maintains quality.

The evaluation of the experts does not contain considerable forms of critique as the QM system of SQU and of CASS is considered to be functioning well.

Based on these findings, the following conditions refer directly to the QM system as such while the following recommendations refer to strategic aspects of SQU and CASS likewise.

1. The provided documents as well as the interviews with stakeholders revealed a rather passive resp. consumer role of students within the QM institutions and procedures. As CASS (and SQU) attaches high value and priority to participation of internal and external stakeholders, it must grant further participation rights to students, who are equally important internal stakeholders. Students should not only act as consumers and observers who are allowed to complain but rather be involved as "co-producers of quality measures" with reference to strategy and targets, teaching and learning, community learning and resources and facilities.
2. All documents resp. publications of CASS with reference to QM should contain a complete list of all the acronyms used.
3. CASS should consider developing a research profile in the future which goes beyond the numeration of research interests of individual academics or small groups of academics.

4. CASS (with support of SQU) should develop an explicit internationalisation strategy. The documents provided by the university lack this kind of strategy. In this context it seems contradictory to pursue an Omanization strategy (which is reasonable) and a vision of internationalisation at the same time. Therefore, it should be clarified how the internationalisation of staff and students will be strengthened.

## 2. Design and approval of study programmes

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*Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. [ESG, criterion 1.2]*

SQU has general policies and procedures for the design, development and approval of academic programmes. The educational objectives are considered attributes that all graduates are required to attain. The development and approval of programmes strictly follow SQU's regulations. New academic programmes receive feedback from local stakeholders and are benchmarked regionally and internationally prior to their approval and after implementation. SQU has published graduate attributes and a policy for new undergraduate academic programmes. The attainment of attributes is measured by the assessment of students as well as feedback from graduates and employers.

### *Process of programme approval*

The undergraduate programme approval process is as follows: A proposal for a new undergraduate programme is initiated, coordinated and scrutinised by the Department Curriculum Committee (DCC) and discussed at the Department Board (DB) followed by the College Curriculum Committee (CCC) and the College Board (CB) before it is recommended to the Academic Council (AC). A presentation is made to the Academic Council. The University Council (UC) grants final approval of the undergraduate programme. Upon approval and before the start of the programme implementation, a Degree Plan and a Work Plan are published for each cohort.

A new postgraduate programme is submitted by the department to the College Postgraduate Committee (CPC), which forwards the proposal to the College Board for discussion and approval. Then, the proposal is sent to the Postgraduate Studies Board (PSB) chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies and Research (DVCPSR); members of PSB include the Dean of Postgraduate Studies (DPS), the DAR, College Assistant Deans for Postgraduate Studies and Research and two appointed members. The latter forwards it to the AC. Submissions to the AC are presented to the UC for final approval. The DAR maintains a record of all postgraduate programmes and registered students.

### *Career Guidance*

The UC provides guidelines on the colleges' annual intakes based on job market projections. The Centre for Career Guidance (CCG) has been established to guide students in planning their career paths successfully, in developing links with different labour sectors and in building connections with its alumni. The CCG organises workshops, seminars and training

courses for students and coordinates the annual employment fair. CASS students are supported in undertaking internships, in final year projects and in participation in extra-curricular activities. The majority of CASS' academic programmes have adjusted their curricula to include training programmes.

In addition, CASS has started a programme to strengthen links with alumni. This programme stipulates that the academic departments should continuously update their alumni database and maintain contact with them.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

There are well-defined policies and procedures for the design, development and approval of all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered at SQU. Newly designed academic programmes receive feedback from local stakeholders and are benchmarked regionally and internationally prior to being approved and offered.

Two recently designed programmes have been discussed with the panel of experts during the site visit: Master of Arts in Tourism (not offered yet) and Master of Arts in Archeology. It is worth noting that, although the Bachelor's degree in Archeology is currently suspended, the Master's degree is running to fulfil the demands from the graduates of its Bachelor's degree and requests from local, regional and international experts. This is due to the nature of the Sultanate's archaeological sites which offer great opportunities to explore the country's heritage, to learn more about it and protect its identity.

The Master of Arts in Archeology was introduced in response to several local authorities in Oman such as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, the Public Authority for Crafts Industries, the Office of Advisor to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs and Muscat Municipality (Master of Arts in Archeology document/ appendix 8.4). Furthermore, CASS consulted regional and international experts (Master of Arts in Archeology document/ appendix 8.3) prior to putting the programme on offer; it was noticed that they all encouraged the introduction of this programme due to its unique nature.

Consequently, this demand has been satisfied by offering the programme in two tracks; one for the international community in which the medium of instruction is English, and one bilingual track (half Arabic & half English) to cater for Omani and regional students. The former track is research based while the latter is divided into 24 credit hours along with a thesis (six credits) written either in Arabic or English. The programme is structured to enable students to receive their Master's degree in two academic years full-time or three years part-time. According to the study plan provided, (Master of Arts in Archeology document) full-time students are expected to take 18 credit hours in the first semester, six credit hours from a pool of elective courses in the second semester followed by one year for their thesis. Students coming from different academic backgrounds ought to be enrolled in four bridging courses before being admitted to the Master's programme.

During the site visit, senior management and academic staff clarified to the panel that to design and introduce a new postgraduate programme at SQU, a clear procedure has to be followed starting from the respective department, to the College Postgraduate Committee (CPC), which forwards the proposal to the College Board for discussion and approval. Then, the proposal is sent to the Postgraduate Studies Board (PSB) which is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies and Research (DVCPSR). The DVCPSR Board

includes the Dean of Postgraduate Studies (DPS), the Deanship of Admission and Registration (DAR), College Assistant Deans for Postgraduate Studies and research and two appointed staff members. Once the proposal has been modified and approved, it should be presented to the Academic Council (AC) before submitting it to the University Council (UC) for final approval. Subsequently, a Degree Plan and a Work Plan are prepared and published before offering the programme. The SER clarifies that the Degree Plan specifies the course requirements with suitable workload for students, credits and other conditions of graduation whereas the Work Plan divides the degree requirements between semesters to help students to graduate in the allocated time span of their degree (Master of Arts in Archeology document/ study plan and Master of Arts in Tourism/ Programme proposal/ Study plan). The panel of experts appreciates that SQU has well-defined and transparent procedures to design and approve new programmes.

In interviews conducted during the site visit, senior management clarified that the Master of Arts in Archeology was designed after conducting a market needs analysis in 2013, interviewing 70% of the Bachelor's degree of the Archeology graduates and consulting the CASS Advisory Committee. Furthermore, the curriculum was sent to local, regional and international experts to collect their feedback and ensure that it is benchmarked against international practices as mentioned earlier (Master of Arts in Archeology document/ appendix 8.3). The experts' feedback tackled issues related to content/topics, relevancy, assessment methods, progression of courses, intended learning outcomes, graduate attributes and fulfilling labour market needs. The obtained feedback has been incorporated in the programme where applicable and upon the agreement of all the involved parties in the designing process. The panel of experts commends CASS for this benchmarking process which runs before approving a newly designed programme.

In interviews, the panel of experts was informed that since SQU follows the credit hour system, the same is applied for any newly designed programme where a total of either 120 or 126 credit hours is relevant for undergraduate programmes depending on the nature of the programme and 30 credit hours for any Master's degree while all PhD programmes are research based only.

As per SQU regulations, the structure of any newly designed undergraduate programme consists of a foundation programme, common core general education modules (university requirements) aiming at instilling cultural orientation (including Arabic language, Oman and Islamic Civilization and Contemporary Omani Society), and three university elective modules covering topics related to creative writing, innovation and entrepreneurship, research methodology and ethics. In addition, department major requirements and department major electives along with modules related to their specific specialization were applicable as stated in the SER. In general, the curriculum of the programme is well-organized to provide academic progression year on year and course by course, with suitable workloads for students. The panel of experts is satisfied with the structure of the undergraduate programmes specifically by the modules related to cultural orientation. During interviews, academic staff highlighted that a module on 'Research Methodology' is incorporated in all programmes offered at CASS (Master of Arts in Archeology document/ Study plan/Arch 6010 and Master of Arts in Tourism/Programme proposal/ Study plan/TOUR 6012) to achieve SQU's vision, mission and strategic plan (2016-2040). The panel appreciates that this module is part of all programmes offered at CASS.

Interviews with academic staff clarified that students have the option to graduate with a major or a combination of a major with a minor or a major with specific specialization depending on the nature of the newly designed programme. The panel observes that admission criteria for all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered at CASS follow SQU admission regulations as students are expected to pass placement tests before being admitted regardless of the nature or the medium of instruction in these programmes. Therefore, the panel encourages CASS to introduce different specific/specialised admission criteria for its newly admitted students depending on the nature of the programme that is being designed and its medium of instruction.

During interviews with senior management, it was highlighted that the structure of any newly designed programme has to include either a Graduation Project or a thesis. For the undergraduate programme, a compulsory Graduation Project is incorporated to allow students to transfer/link theory with practice as shown in the SER and Annex 9A (Study plan for Tourism Management/ Module TOUR4330) whereas a thesis is injected in all postgraduate programmes such as in the Master of Arts in Archeology (document/ Study Plan/ Module Arch 7001) and in the Master of Arts in Tourism (Programme Proposal document/ Study Plan/ Module TOUR 7000). The panel of experts appreciates that a graduation project is obligatory for all newly developed undergraduate programmes.

In order to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills that are required for the workplace, SQU pays special attention to producing and enhancing the 'quality of its graduates' as laid down in its vision statement relevant to all its colleges. Consequently, an internship/placement programme is an important component in all running and newly designed undergraduate programmes offered at CASS as it allows students to gather first-hand experience and be fully prepared to face the challenges of the real world. Currently, there are eight academic programmes offering compulsory internships for their students. The panel appreciates that CASS prepares its graduates for the workplace by offering internships/placement programmes in all its running and newly designed undergraduate programmes.

During interviews, academic staff members involved in the designing process confirm what the self-evaluation report indicated that all CASS programmes are designed and approved based on clearly defined Programme Educational Objectives (PEOs) and Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). The former refers to preparing graduates for their professional career while the latter focuses more on students' achievements during their period of study. Having PEOs and SLOs aims to ensure that learning outcomes/ educational objectives have been mapped at programme level and are aligned to the institution's mission to enable SQU to fulfil its Strategic Plan (2016-2040). The panel commends CASS for having this practice. It is worth noting that the mapping between PEOs and SLOs is operationalized by the Department Board and CASS Advisory Committee members in order to ensure that this mapping fulfils Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) requirements/standards. The attainment of both SLOs and PEOs is measured by assessing students' academic achievements in the modules and consulting both graduates and employers about the structure and the delivery of the newly introduced/designed programme once it has been offered. The panel of experts is satisfied with CASS's approach of involving its stakeholders to assess the achievements of its graduates.

## Findings:

1. The Panel appreciates that SQU has well-defined and transparent procedures to design and approve new programmes.
2. The panel commends CASS for its benchmarking process which runs before approving the newly designed programme.
3. The panel appreciates that a module on 'Research Methodology' is incorporated in all programmes including the newly designed ones offered at CASS.
4. The panel appreciates that CASS prepares its graduates for the workplace by offering internships/placement programmes in all its running and newly designed undergraduate programmes.
5. Programme Educational Objectives (PEOs) and Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are mapped and well-aligned to achieve SQU's strategic plans.
6. The Panel encourages CASS to develop programme specific entry requirements for its programmes depending on the nature of the programme and its medium of instruction. Those who apply for engineering or visual design should have specific entry criteria related to their field. By doing so, CASS will be able to indirectly filter its candidates and guide those who are skilled or talented to study the field of their interest.

### 3. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

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*Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned. [ESG, criterion 1.9]*

CASS performs regular and periodic reviews of its academic programmes. The reviews are complemented by faculty experiences, Student Liaison Committees, Department/College Advisory Boards and alumni input; all provide local feedback. International input is requested from external assessors, who ensure compatibility of curricula with international peers. The data is coordinated by the Department Curriculum Committee, which submits its recommendations to the Department Board and finally to the college. A policy for the review of all undergraduate academic programmes has been approved which establishes an Academic Programme Review Office (APRO) to manage the process.

All academic programmes at CASS are subject to mandatory review every four years using a common template for a detailed Self-Study Report.

External Assessors submit reports on undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. Their duties include reviewing student assessment against course objectives, meeting with students as well as faculty members and attending inaugural and exit meetings with the Dean of the College and the DVCAACS (Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Community Services). They submit reports to the DVCAACS with constructive recommendations. The reports are discussed by the departments involved and actions taken to address the recommendations are conveyed to the DVCAACS.

## **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU and CASS not only ensure the quality of new programmes, but also place no less emphasis on regularly and systematically reviewing existing programmes. As generally applied to the quality assurance systems at SQU and CASS, the review is based on quality circles: The starting point is a clear mission, execution is based on clear processes. Data is gathered systematically and results of the review are applied in the interests of continuous improvement.

All stakeholders, administrators, academic staff, students, alumni, contacts within industry and society as well as foreign experts are involved in one way or another with the review of programmes at CASS, and the results are communicated to them.

Review of programmes is based on the SQU Academic Programme Review Policy, which provides for the alignment of academic programmes with the mission of SQU, the effectiveness of academic programmes in achieving the educational objectives (graduate attributes/learning outcomes), continuous improvement of programmes, compliance of programmes with national and international quality standards, dissemination of good practice within SQU, accountability for the public of SQU graduates' qualifications, identifying possible areas of improvement, and preparing academic programmes for accreditation.

Quality processes concerning regular monitoring and periodical review of programmes are clear, efficient and transparent. They address all the main components of the programmes, i.e. ensuring that definitions of learning outcomes for individual courses and entire programmes are available and regularly updated; that the design of the curriculum is up to date; that student assessment and feedback are effective and take intended learning outcomes into account; that the student workload is reviewed and reasonably distributed; that teaching evaluation surveys are implemented efficiently and followed up; and, last but not least, that the programmes are compatible with the needs of industry and society. Retention, progression and completion are monitored as well as outcomes for students in industry and society.

In connection to the preparation for the accreditation of CASS, SQU and CASS reviewed all programmes and updated curricula, course descriptions, syllabi, assessment procedures, student expectations towards programme offerings, etc. In the discussion between the panel of experts and staff and administrators, it emerged that this work proved useful.

SQU has a clear mission regarding learning environments and student support. The university monitors the efficiency of these areas of its operations and ensures that they serve their purpose. On the site visit, the panel of experts got the chance to inspect the study facilities and support services for students. It can be stated that the learning environment is exemplary and all major study support services are available, e.g. libraries (the central library and the separate CASS library), access to online databases, IT services, sports and leisure facilities, labs, student counselling and career services, as well as special accommodation for disabled students.

On the site visit, however, the panel of experts noticed that the majority of books available in the CASS library are in Arabic and English language and the selection of leading international scholarly works in the relevant subjects was rather limited. The panel of experts therefore suggests that the administrators of CASS monitor if there is a need for more international scientific literature in other languages.

In relation to this, it also emerged at meetings between the expert panel and students that the latter wish to receive more training in English. It is a challenge, however an important



one, for the administrators of SQU to strike a suitable balance between Omanisation and internationalisation.

Benchmarking of the programmes against foreign universities is carried out in various ways, but the selection of foreign universities for comparison depends on the departments. The expert panel therefore suggests that CASS considers to carry out comparison with selected foreign universities in a more systematic manner.

Students actively participate in the regular review of programmes, e.g. through teaching evaluation surveys and joint meetings with teaching and administrative staff. Such surveys provide an important forum for students to communicate their expectations, needs and satisfaction, to provide teaching staff with feedback, and to indicate areas they feel could be improved. The surveys are completed voluntarily and online. Students are reminded of the surveys, which are conducted at the end of courses. In the discussions between the expert panel and CASS students and teaching staff, it emerged that students are generally satisfied with the teaching evaluation surveys, and teaching staff also report that they are useful. However, on the basis of the discussion with the students the panel of experts suggests that SQU and CASS consider whether more diverse methods of evaluating courses, e.g. the use of shorter and simpler mid-semester surveys, could be useful in that it would then be possible to respond to results whilst courses are still running.

Results from the regular review of programmes at CASS are generally used to develop and update learning outcomes and constantly improve programmes. Although processes are in place to ensure that the curricula remain appropriate, discussions between the panel of experts and students revealed dissatisfaction concerning the issue of whether courses are always up to date compared to the expectations and needs of the students as well as concerning the latest research in the relevant disciplines. On the site visit, it also emerged that the selection of external stakeholders to be involved in the review of programmes seems to focus in particular on representatives of state and public institutions, but it was not clear to the panel whether the involvement of industry was ensured to the same extent. With regard to this, it emerges in the SER that in the on-going monitoring of the programmes, a considerable amount of emphasis is placed on the changing needs of society and industry. An example is given of the Bachelor programmes of the Departments of Archaeology, Theatre and Philosophy, which have been suspended due to the low employment rates of their graduates. Although the panel of experts considers it very positive that SQU has the flexibility to adjust programmes in accordance with the needs of industry, it is not entirely clear to the panel of experts if the university measures the employability of students for every single programme in a systematic manner. With regards to the evaluation of the short-term or long-term needs of the job market, consideration must also be given to the fact that the global job market will face drastic changes in the future since various jobs that currently exist will disappear while others will be created. On the site visit, it became obvious that SQU intended to make greater use of alumni as advisors in this respect. This is positive and will strengthen external feedback on the relevance of programmes.

As stated above, the ongoing and periodic review of programmes is based on quality circles. This means, for example, that as a consequence of the monitoring the intended learning outcomes are updated. Since the institutional accreditation applies to the quality assurance system as a whole, it was not the task of the panel of experts to verify this component regarding individual programmes. This was carried out by another panel of experts for the review of the Tourism programme.

The results of the QA processes at SQU and CASS are considered in the further development of the programmes. Curricular modifications are documented in a transparent manner and contribute to an improvement in programme quality. Information regarding the programmes and qualifications are published regularly and the stakeholders are informed about the results of the QA process.

### **Findings:**

CASS periodically monitors and reviews its programmes to ensure that it achieves its set objectives and responds to the needs of students and society. The reviews lead to continuous improvement of the programmes. Actions planned or taken as a result are communicated to all those involved.

1. The panel encourages CASS to continue to promote the internationalisation of study.
2. The panel therefore suggests that CASS develops a more focused approach to the selection of foreign universities for comparison (benchmarking).
3. The expert panel suggests that CASS continues to develop different methods for evaluating the needs of industry and society and to update the programmes according to these needs.

## **4. Learning, teaching and assessment of students**

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*Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach. [ESG, criterion 1.3]*

The curriculum requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are stated in the Undergraduate Academic Regulations (UAR) and Postgraduate Academic Regulations (PAR).

### *General Education Core Curriculum Requirements*

Students enrolled in CASS must successfully complete common core general education requirement modules. Undergraduate students should satisfy the Foundation Programme (FP) requirements first before enrolling in their degree programme. Students may graduate with a major, a combination of a major and a minor, or a major with specialization. The university objectives of cultural orientation, engagement with society and moral attainment are addressed in the university required courses (Arabic language, Oman and Islamic Civilisation, Contemporary Omani Society) and three elective courses from a variety of two-credit courses that span a range of disciplines. The university elective courses cover topics in creative writing, innovation and entrepreneurship, research methodology and ethics. The attainment of the objectives of commitment to critical thinking, problem solving, lifelong learning and creativity are also satisfied by CASS and the Bachelor programmes' core and elective courses including a compulsory final year project.

CASS has established Programme Educational Objectives (PEO) and Students Learning Outcomes (SLO) for its programmes in accordance with OAAA perception; PEOs and SLOs are discussed within the Department Board and the Advisory Committee which reflects the

employers' spectrum. Student Liaison Committee meetings provide students' feedback on PEO and SLO.

### *Teaching methods*

CASS faculty members use a range of learning technologies to enhance their learning methods. Moodle is used by faculties and provides an efficient interactive e-learning platform. CASS learning approaches have been developed and imbedded in a variety of courses to achieve university objectives aimed at familiarizing the Omani youth with scientific methods and self-reliance. This objective was consolidated to become a required attribute of graduates who should possess skills for research and an ability to critically analyse complex information and to present it in a simple intelligible manner.

CASS learning approaches are summarised as follows: a) Active learning where students are engaged in the learning process via oral presentations or posters; b) Cooperative learning where a group of students executes the same project as a team to improve their understanding of the subject; c) Project-based learning or a graduation project usually offered in the final year and performed independently by a student under the supervision of a faculty member.

Problem-based learning is a main teaching method. CASS considers research training part of the undergraduate programme and offers courses in methodology, data analysis and interpretation. Research training is also incorporated in some courses which foster a problem-based approach.

### *Assessment*

Continuous assessment of a student's performance is mandated by the Undergraduate Academic Regulations (UAR). The University Executive Regulations stipulate that the Department Board shall review and approve students' grades. Assessment methods for a course are communicated to students during the first lecture and handed to them in the course file. The grades are submitted to DAR online.

The UAR and Postgraduate Academic Regulations (PAR) also stipulate progression standards, appeals against grades assigned, grade change procedures, academic achievements and awards as well as terms for a probation status. A structured appeal process has been instituted in the UAR by which students can appeal against grades given to them within 30 days of the grades announcement. Students first consult with the course instructor. If not satisfied, they may appeal to the HoD who forms a committee with the instructor and other colleagues to submit to him a recommendation. The HoD then makes a decision which is forwarded to the Dean for final approval.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The panel of experts generally acknowledges that CASS cares for the needs of its students and values their interests and opinions. Students are involved in the QA system and their voice is heard if they have complaints. Nevertheless, until now the college has neither introduced a policy for students involvement in the QA system to help in enhancing the delivery of the programmes offered at CASS.

Regular evaluation of the adequacy and appropriateness of methods of teaching and learning is being conducted at CASS. Some programmes evaluate the ILOs but it is unclear whether this is done in a systematic way. Academic staff explained and highlighted during

the interview session that a variety of teaching methods are applied in their classes including group discussions, case studies, problem solving, debates, independent learning by surfing the electronic resources available in the library databases, using YouTube and social media. Interviewed students confirmed the use of these methods and commended the academic staff for incorporating YouTube and social media in their classes. Although all panel members are satisfied with the current teaching methods they are convinced that the new Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning will strengthen the efforts of CASS to implement new teaching and learning methods.

Students' expectations are included in course evaluations. The evaluation procedure that is based on feedback from internal and external constituents has a time span of four years for periodic review. In the opinion of the panel of experts this may be too long to keep all programmes up to date; however, from the point of view of the universities the time span is considered sufficient.

Elements of student-centred learning are considered in the design of new programmes as well as in already established programmes. CASS describes in the SER that there are different modes of delivery and a variety of pedagogical methods. The college is trying to strengthen the autonomy of the learner, and student-teacher relations seem to be good; however, there is no explicitly formulated policy on this topic.

The institution uses policies similar to the national level for supporting equal opportunities for students in special circumstances, for students with special needs or for students with specific social backgrounds. The experts recognized during the on site visit that particular students are supported with visual disabilities. CASS established a special needs lab to support these students. In the opinion of the panel of experts the technical infrastructure is excellent and students with disabilities receive ample support and guidance. Regarding this group of students CASS takes into account their special needs and enables flexible learning paths.

Assessment regulations and procedures are defined by SQU which are readily available in published form to students. Criteria for and methods of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance. CASS checks if assessment methods are related to ILOs. Feedback to students concerning the results of the assessments is provided. Therefore, the panel of experts can confirm that assessment is combined with feedback to students and if necessary linked to adjusting the learning process. CASS also checks if assessments are applied in a fair way.

CASS has procedures in place to secure that assessors are familiar with current testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field.

### **Findings:**

CASS is well aware of the importance of the teaching and learning process. Concerning the use of ILO and the interlinkage of ILOs with assessments CASS is up to date.

1. Although the panel of experts does not raise doubts about the considerable effort which is taken to strengthen the autonomy of the learner, the policy and the approach of CASS should be made more explicit.
2. CASS should define the role of the students within its QA system and procedures.

## 5. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

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*Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification. [ESG, criterion 1.4]*

The AC defines the admission criteria for entrance to the various undergraduate programmes. Admitted students should satisfy the Foundation Programme (FP) requirements before they move to their Colleges. Omani students apply to SQU through the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC), while international students are nominated through the Ministry of Higher Education. Students are accepted to the colleges based on their grades in the General Education Diploma (GED), their preferences and the admission criteria set by the colleges. The entry requirements for students with qualifications other than the GED are also specified in the admission criteria.

The FP, which sets the national standards for admission to undergraduate studies, became mandatory at SQU in 2010. Students arrive at the university for the orientation period two weeks before the start of the Fall semester. They take placement tests in the English language, in mathematics and IT followed by exit tests in these subjects. Those who pass the exit test will have satisfied the FP requirement for the subject. Failed students must register in the relevant courses. Students who fulfil all FP requirements proceed to their college.

SQU follows a credit system whereby students' progress towards graduation in their college/major by earning a specific number of credits in each semester that count toward the total number of credits required for graduation. The credit system offers students the chance to pursue their university education in accordance with Degree Plans.

SQU follows a semester calendar with Fall and Spring semesters of fifteen weeks each plus an examination period of two weeks; the Summer semester lasts seven weeks plus one week of examinations. The Summer semester makes available a limited range of courses that are either remedial in nature, pre-requisites or needed to graduate.

### *Academic attendance*

Being a public university funded entirely by the government, students are required to attend classes with attendance being recorded; absenteeism may result in failure in a given course. Students may withdraw from a course within a prescribed deadline or even be granted permission to postpone a semester. The university believes that academic attendance is one of the key factors that determine students' performance.

In the academic year 2015-2016, the university has implemented an attendance tracking system to help instructors track students individually and to measure their interests. The regulations stipulate that absenteeism is tolerated up to 5% of the total duration of the course during the semester.

### *Academic transfer*

The Undergraduate Academic Regulations specify clearly inter-college transfer criteria, which are outlined in a pamphlet published by the DAR and in College Handbooks. The Executive Regulations also stipulate terms and conditions for credit transfer for exchange and visiting students.

### *Academic advising*

Comprehensive academic advising and registration guides are available online. The purpose of academic advising is to provide students with information and guidance so that they may take responsibility for their programme and achieve their academic objectives. The advising process starts with an orientation programme where new students meet the Dean, the Assistant Deans and Heads of Departments, other faculty members and senior students.

The objective of this orientation is to guide new students in making a smooth and successful transition to university life by helping them with academic, personal and social adjustments needed. In addition to touring the campus, students are informed about registration and advising processes as well as services available to them on campus. Students are assigned to Academic Advisors (faculty members). Each advisor dedicates two or three hours of office/advising hours each week during which his advisees can visit. All academic advisors are expected to help their advisees in several ways including, but not limited to: a) Choosing an academic programme that meets student's career objectives; b) Guide students about curricula requirements and the procedures for registration, and recommending electives; c) Monitoring the student's progress and guiding course selection, when required.

Students' problems which cannot be resolved by the academic advisors are referred to the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Students at CASS, who is the focal point for solving academic problems at the college level.

Probation students are monitored closely by advisors and additional assistance is provided to them, aimed at facilitating improvement of their grades to cancel the probation status. Unlike students who are not on probation and can register online, probation students must visit their advisors at the beginning of each semester. If the student remains under probation for more than a semester, he/she is required to meet with the Head of the Department and ADUS regarding his/her study plan. The Student Counselling Centre provides a comprehensive support programme to students.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The admission process is defined and transparent; criteria are applied consistently. For new students an introduction within the first days of study is offered at the beginning of the semester. Here, students are drawn to different aspects of study at the institution. The experts recognize that students are well prepared.

Student progression is monitored. The institution uses a large data set and key indicators such as completion rate and course assessment. This data is used to track the programme performance outlined in the annual performance report. Currently, the process is based on Excel tables and templates, but the QA office is in process of reviewing this methodology and acquiring new software that will facilitate the process.

The college has established a system of tracking class attendance. It shows that tracking students' progressions works well.

The SQU is devoted to building national capacity in different fields, the number of international students is limited. Despite this limitation, the number of international students has increased significantly during the last five years. SQU students who wish to take part in an exchange programme must achieve a minimum in their cumulative GPA and completed CP, and may not be in their final year of study. The time for exchange is limited to one academic

year. The panel of experts was informed about different initiatives to enable students to take part in international conferences and some departments have implemented or will offer joint programmes with other universities in the future. There is no doubt that SQU provides structures and programmes for international exchange and that students of CASS can benefit from them. Nevertheless, the panel of experts gained the impression that the mobility of students is quite limited. Therefore, CASS should monitor this aspect and take measures to strengthen the general mobility of students.

Recognition procedures are regulated. The regulations regarding re-sits, disability compensation, illness and other circumstances are written down in the Postgraduate/Undergraduate Academic Regulations Handbook and transparent to all stakeholders.

Finally, the institution ensures that students receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that have been pursued and successfully completed. A transcript of records is handed out upon graduation.

### **Findings:**

All processes concerning student admission, monitoring of student progression, recognition and certification are well defined and implemented by CASS. The panel of experts raises no doubts that the criteria and indicators of this European standard are fulfilled.

1. Although measures to support the international mobility of students are available at the college, this aspect should be strengthened to prepare students for tasks in a globalized labour market.

## **6. Teaching staff**

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*Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their academic staff. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff. [ESG, criterion 1.5]*

Staff planning in SQU is carried out according to a process described in the SER. According to the SER, SQU is keen on recruiting highly qualified Omanis. The best graduates of the university are appointed as demonstrators and sent abroad for their Masters and PhDs before their appointment as Assistant Professors. The Executive Regulations specify the qualifications, experiences and the expertise of academic staff appropriate for employment.

The number of international teaching staff is relatively high. The recruitment procedure for international staff follows this procedure: An advertisement is posted on the SQU website and applications proceed directly to the college or Personnel Department, which forwards them to the relevant colleges. The Recruitment Committee of each department submits a shortlist to the College Recruitment Committee (CRC). The CRC invites shortlisted candidates to deliver seminars and attend interviews at the College; recommended cases are submitted to the University Faculty Recruitment Committee (UFRC) which is chaired by the DVCAACS. Recommendations of the UFRC are submitted to the Vice Chancellor for final approval.

### *Training and Development*

SQU has developed a process concerning academic staff development to maintain a high teaching quality. SQU faculty members should maintain the highest standards of ethics and academic integrity. The Executive Regulations specify how to deal with any professional misconduct and it is dealt with by the University administration.

The university provides in-house workshops offered by different centres. The centres also support teaching with media equipment and e-learning services. They regularly arrange workshops, seminars, consultancies and advice on designing effective instructional materials and utilising educational media and telecommunications. The CSD also organises short professional development courses.

The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning was established to support and advance learning and teaching, and to exchange good practices across the university. Academic staff of CASS may also participate in teaching and learning training courses, workshops and conferences abroad.

### *Performance Management*

Total student credits are used to calculate the full-time equivalent (FTE). Data for the past three years shows that the CASS student-faculty ratio is around 16 which compares well to published international data.

## **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU plays a vital role in assuring that academic staff is highly qualified, competent, and extremely satisfied with the working environment at the institution. According to the SER, CASS has a total of 182 highly qualified academic staff coming from different educational backgrounds with 76% of them holding a PhD.

SQU has a well-documented process for academic staff development to maintain a high teaching quality. The SER clarifies that this process is based on four mechanisms: performance management, training and development, requirement and selection, and staff planning. Furthermore, senior management stressed that SQU expects that all its faculty members maintain the highest standards of ethics and academic integrity. All staff members are obliged to adhere to SQU Executive Regulations in case of any professional misconduct.

During the site visit the academic staff expressed their high satisfaction with the continuous staff professional development workshops or training conducted locally, regionally or abroad. They confirmed that senior management is highly supportive when it comes to developing staff's needs. The panel of experts commends CASS for supporting and encouraging its staff's professional development needs.

From interviews, the panel learnt that CASS follows SQU comprehensive Executive Regulations (ERs) when it comes to recruiting staff. There are two kinds of recruitment: One for Omani citizens and another one for international staff. The panel appreciates that comprehensive Executive Regulations are in place and adhered to by CASS to ensure that all its processes are systematic and in line with the institution's requirements. In interviews, the panel of experts was informed about the requirement for Omani citizens. According to the process, the best graduates of the institution are recruited at the beginning as demonstrators before granting them scholarships to pursue their postgraduate degrees abroad. Once they are back, they are appointed as Assistant Professors. The SERs specify the qualifications,



experience and expertise of academic staff appropriate for employment. Recruiting administrative Omani staff starts by placing an internal advertisement with the job description on the intranet. Candidates are shortlisted and sent to the concerned department to go through the process (detailed in the below paragraph) to get the final approval from the Vice Chancellor. The process of recruiting local and administrative staff was also confirmed by newly appointed staff members. Interviews with senior management clarified that each year CASS recruits five Omani academics and 15-20 international ones. The panel of experts encourages CASS to develop a long-term succession plan to increase the number of Omani recruits each year whenever possible depending on its needs and the required specializations.

During the site visit senior management highlighted that there are certain institutional criteria and conditions that ought to be followed by CASS when recruiting international academics such as but not limited to that the candidate is a graduate from a reputable international university, that he/she has extensive involvement in publishing research papers related to his specialization along with practical teaching experience. Practical experience differs according to the academic rank. If the candidate is applying for an Assistant Professor position, three years are required; in case of Associate Professor or Full Professor six and 10 years of practical experience are required respectively. As mentioned above, the number of international recruits is relatively high compared to the locals as the institution is keen to attract academics who are experts in their fields especially if their specialization is rare locally and regionally.

In the discussions the panel of experts was informed that the recruitment for international academics follows this procedure: an advertisement is posted on the SQU website and applications proceed directly to the college or Personnel Department, which directs them to relevant colleges. The Recruitment Committee of each Department submits the names of the shortlisted candidates to the College Recruitment Committee (CRC). The CRC invites them to Oman to conduct a job interview and the recommended candidates are submitted to the University Faculty Recruitment Committee (UFRC) which is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Community Services (DVCAACS). Recommendations of the UFRC are submitted to the Vice Chancellor for final approval. The same procedure is followed when recruiting Omanis. The panel appreciates the transparent recruitment procedure that is followed by CASS to attract highly qualified academics from Oman or abroad.

Newly appointed staff highlighted that they all had gone through a comprehensive formal induction programme where they met the Dean, Head of Departments and their colleagues. Moreover, the Head of the Department informs them about all the issues related to their duties and assigns senior academics to mentor each new recruit for one semester. It is worth mentioning that CASS received the highest satisfaction rate for its induction programme at SQU level in 2014. The panel appreciates the comprehensive induction programme that is conducted by CASS for its newly appointed staff.

Interviewed academics highlighted that SQU has three centres to support its teaching staff, address their needs and enhance their professional development. These are the Centre for Staff Development (CSD), the Centre for Education Technology (CET), and the Centre for Information Systems (CIS). The CSD organizes several workshops, short professional development courses and seminars while the CIS and CET focus on producing effective course materials by employing technology in educational materials.

During interviews, senior management highlighted that to ensure that all staff members are fully supported at all levels, SQU has established a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) to support the other three centres and introduce staff members to innova-

tive teaching methods, learning methodologies and technological advancements in e-learning. Qualified and expert academics are involved and act as a link between the CETL and their concerned/respective departments. Moreover, the CETL conducts regular surveys to check and fulfils staff's professional needs.

It is obvious to the panel that SQU is keen to strengthen its research activities by providing incentives for staff and establishing ten research centres across Oman to serve the community. This in turn enables SQU to be in line with its strategic plan (2016-2040), which consists of five domains (undergraduate teaching and learning, postgraduate teaching and learning, research, creativity and innovation, community engagement).

In interviews, the panel learnt that different kinds of incentives are introduced at SQU to enhance research such as research funds, conference attendance, research leave (28 days per year), sabbatical leave, annual distinguished research awards, annual awards for articles cited in Scopus or the Web of knowledge database and biennially international conferences. All these incentives are highly appreciated and valued by CASS's staff members including academics and non-academics as expressed in the interviews conducted with them. They also stressed that senior management is always encouraging and supportive when it comes to research or attending conferences. However, some raised their concerns with respect to their teaching load which can be high at times and thus affecting their research output, while others confirmed that they work on collaborative research to overcome this obstacle.

Furthermore, interviewed staff members highlighted that they always incorporate their research output into their teaching materials or teaching methods where applicable, and all members stressed that students receive their output in a very positive attitude as they feel that they are up to date with the latest trends in their specializations. Interviewed academics highlighted, though, that for certain subjects it is not easy to update the material regularly, so they link it to current events where possible/applicable to ensure that the presented topics are not boring or out-dated. On the one hand, the panel of experts commends SQU incentives to spread the culture of research and to enhance it internally and externally at community level; on the other hand, the panel agrees that the institution could do more to strengthen its efforts in the research aspect. The panel suggests that CASS encourages its academic staff to enhance their teaching by complementing their teaching with relevant research output/findings where applicable/possible.

### **Findings:**

1. The panel commends CASS for supporting and encouraging its staff's professional development needs.
2. The panel appreciates that comprehensive Executive Regulations are in place and adhered to by CASS to ensure that all its processes are systematic and in line with the institution's requirements.
3. The panel commends CASS for its transparent recruitment procedure to attract highly qualified academics from Oman or abroad.
4. The panel appreciates the comprehensive induction programme that is conducted by CASS for its newly appointed staff.
5. The panel commends SQU incentives to spread the culture of research and to enhance it internally and externally at community level.

6. The panel encourages CASS to develop a long-term succession plan to increase the number of Omani recruits each year whenever possible depending on its needs and the required specializations.
7. The panel suggests that CASS encourages its academic staff to enhance their teaching by incorporating their research output into their classes where applicable/possible.

## **7. Learning Resources and student support**

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*Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided. [ESG, criterion 1.6]*

According to the SER, the college applies a process for providing learning resources and student support services. In addition, CASS has two units for IT and multimedia support.

SQU facilities include teaching classrooms, lecture theatres, conference halls, libraries, staff and student residences with separate male and female sport facilities, accommodation for students with special needs, staff and student recreational facilities, and a mosque. The newly established SQU Cultural Centre houses the university's main library, the Omani Studies Centre, Al-Faham lecture hall and the Grand Hall with a seating capacity of 5,000. SQU's main library is the largest library in the country.

The Library of the College of Arts and Social Sciences is a specialised library in the Arts and Humanities. Its role is supplementary to the main library striving with a remit to serve students, faculty members and staff of the college. The library is connected with other libraries on campus through the library portal system, which aims at updating and informing about its resources and making them easily accessible.

CASS has its own bookstore that provides students with textbooks for most courses. The list of textbooks is updated annually based on academic staff feedback. Each year academic staff is asked to place orders for textbooks and these are obtained for the coming year.

SQU provides a support system for all students with regard to studies. It includes consultations with academic advisors about the individual programme plan. In addition, there is a Student Counselling Centre for the university and an advisor for student affairs in each department.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The panel of experts was impressed by the resources which are provided by SQU to support the learning and teaching activities. The university has defined and implemented key indicators and they are regularly used. The institution uses processes to provide material resources which are well established and in place. SQU has two libraries which provide material for CASS students: a main library and a library in the premises of the college. CASS provides textbooks and the provision is regularly updated. Mechanisms operate to assure that there is an appropriate amount of literature available.

Internal QA processes assure that resources are fit for purpose; feedback mechanisms check if the needs of a diverse student population are covered. Central student advisory service is available. The experts perceived a strong and trustful relationship between

students and teaching staff. There are sufficient resources available to provide individual assistance, advice and support for all students. The student liaison committee of each department meets at least once a semester.

Training opportunities are also available for administrative staff.

The experts learned that members of the teaching staff are readily available on any issue regarding the degree programmes and that they offer academic advice. The panel of experts appreciates this “open door policy”. Students are well informed about the services available to them.

### **Finding:**

In the experts’ opinion learning resources and student support are well funded. All the different aspects of this topic are taken into account. The panel of experts sees no need to suggest improvements.

## **8. Information management and public information**

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*Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyze and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.*

*Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible. [ESG, criterion 1.7 and 1.8]*

The Quality Assurance Office has established an effective system of data collection to develop quality assurance Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The College Annual Performance Report (CAPR) focuses on the strategic direction of the college and its alignment with the university mission, objectives and Strategic Plan. The CAPR provides an opportunity for the college to integrate its reporting and planning activities so that one informs and strengthens the other. The report includes sections on: a) Evaluation of College strategy and targets; b) Teaching and learning; c) Research and consultancy; d) Community service; e) Resources and facilities, f) Risk management.

CASS publishes a yearly report based on a compilation of the Department's annual report. This report includes detailed information about activities, achievements and initiatives in teaching and learning, research and community services within the college.

### **Experts’ Evaluation**

Most aspects of the system, procedures of information management and public information as well as of ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programs have already been discussed under ESG criterion 1.1. The talks with academics, students and non academic staff have confirmed the statements about the information management, stakeholder information as well as participation as asserted in the various documents. That is why it can be confirmed that

- SQU and CASS have organized a process for the collection of information from relevant sources and stakeholders like employers, graduates, students and ministries for their analyses and use for the effective management and continuous enhancement of

the programmes, an important information channel being the College Annual Performance Report (CAPR) and the data collected from the stakeholders by the QAO.

- the data is retrieved from the KPI's which are collected by the QAO.
- there is a quality-related information system which covers at least the following data:
  - the institution's own key performance indicators,
  - profile of the student population, student progression,
  - student success rates and drop-out rates,
  - students' satisfaction with their programmes,
  - employment of graduates,
  - learning resources available and their costs.
- students and staff are involved in providing and analyzing information and planning follow-up activities; however, it became not fully transparent if students' satisfaction with their programmes is covered by the current evaluation methods which strongly focus on course evaluation. The intention to open the College Board to students may be a step to enhance information on student satisfaction. Student involvement in the planning of follow-up activities remains an area where further enhancement seems possible.
- impartial and objective up to date information regarding the programme and its qualifications which is target group oriented (for relevant stakeholders) is regularly published.

The regular Academic Program Review (APR) is important for institutional accreditation purposes as the Institutional Accreditation Standards of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) require that institutions carry out review of their academic programmes in order to be accredited. According to SQU Academic Program Review Policy, the objectives of the APR are to align academic programmes with SQU's mission and objectives, to appraise the effectiveness of academic programmes in achieving student outcomes, to assist in enhancing and improving the programme, to assist in planning the future of the programme and to comply with national and international quality standards. The Academic Review Guidelines which have been issued in June 2015 by the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Service prescribe in detail which data has to be presented in the context of the APR.

At the end of the assessment of the QM system of CASS it seems justified to state that CASS - on the grounds of SQU – has developed and lives a well structured, well organized Quality Assurance and Enhancement System which may serve as a model for other higher education institutions.

## **9. General remarks and conclusion**

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SQU is the national university and depends considerably on national strategies and decisions. Due to the resources available the university can provide an excellent basis for study for the Omani youth.

The panel of experts found a well organized and very ambitious College of Arts and Social Sciences. The QA system of CASS is based on well-defined processes and there is no doubt

that a quality culture is present on all levels of the college. The PDCA cycle is completed and data-driven. The different measure of QA at the university, the college and the different departments are interlinked. Students are involved in the designing process of programmes as well as in the evaluation of programmes. Nevertheless, their role should be strengthened and thus made more explicit.

The panel of experts collected evidence on all aspects of QA and of the learning and teaching processes. There is no doubt that many issues relevant to the learning process are well defined and regulated and that commissions are in place to take over responsibility. The availability of data which is relevant to steer QA procedures is excellent. From an international perspective there may even be a danger that some procedures are overregulated. The effort to run the QA system and to monitor the existing programmes must be high. In the end QA is not just a target in itself but an instrument to enable the management of a university to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

For the panel of experts it was obvious that CASS is well aware of the relevance of the learning and teaching process and that the academic staff is ambitious to provide a high academic level to students. Although there is awareness for the autonomy of the learner at CASS, a policy for independent learning is lacking. The experts learned during the site visit that the academic staff tries to include students in its research projects but they would like to encourage CASS to improve the visibility of the interlinkage between teaching and research. It might be helpful if CASS would develop a clearly structured research profile.

During the site visit it became quite clear that all departments pay attention to the labour market orientation of their programmes. Nevertheless, it was not transparent how this is exactly done. Therefore, the expert panel suggests that CASS continues to develop different methods for evaluating the needs of industry and society and to update the programmes according to these needs.

The offers by SQU to encourage the international ambitions of students are excellent and it was impressive to hear that the participation of students in international conferences is financially supported by the university. However, because the aspect of internationalisation is crucial in a globalized world in which graduates of SQU have to compete it is important for CASS to have a clear internationalisation strategy.

### **Suggestions of the Panel of Experts for Conditions and Recommendations:**

1. The role of the students as internal stakeholders of the college must be strengthened. Students must be involved as “co-producers of quality measures” with reference to strategy and targets, teaching and learning, community learning and resources and facilities. CASS must define the role of the students within its QA system and procedures.
2. CASS (with support of SQU) should prepare an action plan for its internationalisation to clarify how the internationalisation of staff and students can be improved. CASS should monitor the results of the measures taken to strengthen the mobility of students.
3. The college should develop programme specific entry requirements for its programmes depending on the nature of the programme and its medium of instruction.

4. The policy and the approach to strengthen the autonomy of the learner should be made more explicit.
5. Supported by the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning CASS should further strengthen the aspect of innovative teaching and learning methods in order to fully achieve CASS's mission.
6. CASS should develop a research profile which goes beyond the numeration of research interests of individual academics or small groups of academics. And the academic staff should be encouraged to enhance their teaching by incorporating their research output into their classes where applicable/possible.
7. CASS should put down its standards towards academic freedom which could also be helpful for international cooperation.
8. CASS should develop a long-term succession plan to increase the number of Omani recruits.

## V. Appendix

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### SCHEDULE

**Visit to the College of Arts and Social Sciences at  
Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat  
Date: 10 to 12 April 2016**

<b>April 10, 2016 – Sunday</b>	
<b>Day 1</b>	
<b>15.00</b>	<b>Pick up at the hotel</b>
<b>15.30</b>	<b>Welcome at the College of Arts and Social Sciences</b> Followed by a guided tour through the campus (library, class rooms etc.). The experts have the opportunity to take a look at the premises and facilities that are relevant to the College of Arts and Social Sciences
<b>17.30</b>	<b>End of guided tour</b>
<b>18.00</b>	<b>Internal meeting of the expert panel and dinner</b>
<b>April 11, 2016 – Monday</b>	
<b>Day 2</b>	
<b>9.00</b>	<b>Internal discussion of the expert panel to prepare the site visit (<i>experts only</i>)</b> (meeting room at SQU required)
<b>12.30</b>	<b>lunch of the expert panel</b>
<b>14.00</b>	<b>Discussion with the Management of SQU</b> The discussion serves to acquaint the experts with the University, with its overall strategies with regard to its colleges and study programmes. The experts may wish to discuss questions of past and future development of SQU as well as general questions to understand the university context.
<b>15.00</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>15.15</b>	<b>Discussion with Heads of College of Arts and Social Sciences</b>
<b>16.45</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>17.00</b>	<b>Discussion with the academic staff from different programmes of College of Arts and Social Sciences (max 12)</b>
<b>18.30</b>	<b>End of visit</b>
<b>April 12, 2016 – Tuesday</b>	
<b>Day 3</b>	
<b>09.00</b>	<b>Discussion with the responsible staff for QA of the College and the University (QA office &amp; College staff for QA)</b>
<b>10.30</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>11.00</b>	<b>Discussion with students</b> The experts may wish to discuss how students are involved in the evaluation of teaching and learning, feasibility of study and assessment, feedback, student support etc.
<b>12.30</b>	<b>Lunch (<u>internal meeting of the experts</u>)</b>
<b>13.30</b>	<b>Discussion with Technical Staff</b>



<b>14.30</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>15.00</b>	<b>Optional discussion with Head of College</b>
<b>15.45</b>	<b>Internal Discussion of the panel, discussion of findings and preparation of the experts report</b>
<b>18.00</b>	<b>Feedback to the College</b>
<b><i>Aprox. 18.30</i></b>	<b><i>End of visit</i></b>