



AGENTUR FÜR  
QUALITÄTSSICHERUNG DURCH  
AKKREDITIERUNG VON  
STUDIENGÄNGEN E.V.

## FINAL REPORT

SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN

## TOURISM (BACHELOR)

JULY 2023



**Content**

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## DECISION OF THE AQAS STANDING COMMISSION ON THE STUDY PROGRAMME

### ▪ “TOURISM” (BACHELOR)

### OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN

Based on the report of the expert panel, the comments by the university and the discussions of the AQAS Standing Commission in its 17<sup>th</sup> meeting on 22 May 2023 and the circulation procedure of 21 June 2023, the AQAS Standing Commission decides:

1. The study programme “**Tourism**” (**Bachelor**) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University, Oman** is accredited according to the AQAS Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Bachelor/Master).

The accreditation is conditional.

The study programme essentially complies with the requirements defined by the criteria and thus the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in their current version. The required adjustments can be implemented within a time period of twelve months.

2. The conditions have to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions has to be documented and reported to AQAS no later than **31 July 2024**. The confirmation of the conditions might include a physical site visit within the time period of twelve months.
3. The accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **31 July 2029**.

#### Conditions:

1. The scholarly profile of the programme must be strengthened and in particular more opportunities must be given to students to actually apply academic skills in writing.
2. The introductory management courses and the courses on statistics must be shifted to the first half of the programme.
3. The role of students in the quality assurance processes must be strengthened.
4. The Department must make use of existing structures and support academic mobility of students on a practical level by entering agreements with other Universities and/or Departments.
5. The exams must be more oriented on the competencies which are mentioned in the intended learning outcomes in the course descriptions and strive to correspond them more strongly.

The following **recommendations** are given for further improvement of the programme:

1. It is suggested to implement a longer internship period (e.g., six months in a row instead of the two shorter periods), enabling a more comprehensive and detailed insight into practice.

2. It is recommended to implement more practical training facilities at the university, e.g. a 'lab' for hotel front office tasks or a kitchen and service training facility or to agree with an hotel to make use of its infrastructure.
3. Students should get more opportunities to gain their own practical experience with industry specific software.
4. In order to attract more competent and motivated students, the department should consider additional measures of marketing its programme.
5. It should be ensured that the evaluation of students' achievements is carried out individually, so that group grading is reflecting the individual achievements and performance within the group.
6. The department should monitor the reasons for the lacking satisfaction with online teaching and learning and implement measures to make it more attractive.

With regard to the reasons for this decision the Standing Commission refers to the attached experts' report.

## EXPERTS' REPORT ON THE STUDY PROGRAMME

### ▪ "TOURISM" (BACHELOR)

### OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN

Visit to the university: 29.11.2022, 01.-02.12.2022 (online visit)

#### Panel of experts:

<b>Prof. Dr. Frank Fichert</b>	University of Applied Sciences Worms, Department of Tourism and Travel Management
<b>Prof. Dr. Dagmar Lund-Durlacher</b>	University for Sustainable Development Eberswalde, Centre for Sustainable Tourism
<b>Safa Al Balushi</b>	Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Oman (representative of the labour market)
<b>Lina Hebestriet</b>	Student of International Tourism Management (B.A.), University Bremen (student expert)

#### Coordinator:

Doris Herrmann AQAS, Cologne, Germany

Supported by:

Dr. Mayada Woriedh

## I. Preamble

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AQAS – Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – is an independent non-profit organisation supported by more than 90 universities, universities of applied sciences and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been recognised by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is, therefore, a notified body for the accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany.

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 the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), on which all Bologna countries agreed as a basis for internal and external quality assurance.

AQAS is an institution founded by and working for higher education institutions and academic associations. The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of academic studies and higher education institutions' teaching. In line with AQAS' mission statement, the official bodies in Germany and Europe (GAC and EQAR) approved that the activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither limited to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor a particular type of higher education institution.

## II. Accreditation procedure

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This report results from the external review of the Bachelor programme "Tourism" offered by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

### 1. Criteria

The programme is assessed against a set of criteria for accreditation developed by AQAS: the AQAS Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Bachelor/Master). The criteria are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015. To facilitate the review each criterion features a set of indicators that can be used to demonstrate the fulfilment of the criteria. However, if single indicators are not fulfilled this does not automatically mean that a criterion is not met. The indicators need to be discussed in the context of each programme since not all indicators necessarily can be applied to every programme.

### 2. Approach and methodology

#### *Initialisation*

The university mandated AQAS to perform the reaccreditation procedure in January 2022. The university produced a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). In February 2022, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation on the programme and an appendix as well as statistical data on the programme. The appendix included e.g.:

- course descriptions
- academic regulations
- list of the teaching staff and
- an overview over statistical data of the student body (beginners, students, graduates, student dropouts)

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility, and transparency. The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Standing Commission on 21 February 2022. The final version of the SER was handed in June 2022.

*Nomination of the expert panel*

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the respective discipline, the labour market, and students are involved. Furthermore, AQAS follows the principles for the selection of experts defined by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). The Standing Commission nominated the aforementioned expert panel in June 2022. AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and the university did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

*Preparation of the site visit*

Due to some disruptions during the pandemic the procedure was delayed. To be able to assess the programme within a reasonable period of time, the site visit was carried out online. In the first international accreditation procedure in 2016 there was an on-site visit and one of the former panel members also participated in this re-accreditation so that he informed the other panel members about the infrastructure provided by SQU.

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

*Site visit*

After a review of the SER, a site visit to the university took place online on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022 and 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> December 2022. The experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. the management of the higher education institution, the programme management, teaching and other staff, as well as students and graduates, in separate discussion rounds and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded by the presentation of the preliminary findings of the group of experts to the university's representatives.

*Reporting*

After the site visit had taken place, the expert group drafted the following report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS Criteria. The report included a recommendation to the AQAS Standing Commission. The report was sent to the university for comments.

*Decision*

The report, together with the comments of the university, forms the basis for the AQAS Standing Commission to take a decision regarding the accreditation of the programme. Based on these two documents, the AQAS Standing Commission took its decision on its meeting on 22 May 2023. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

In June 2023, AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel of experts.

**III. General information on the university**

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was established as an independent entity in 1986 with a total of nine colleges (Agriculture, Education, Engineering, Medicine, Science, Arts and Social Sciences, Economics and Political Sciences, Law, Nursing) offering 63 undergraduate programmes, 74 Master's programmes and 38 PhD programmes. SQU aims to further strengthen its national role in higher education and community service and be internationally recognised for innovative research, the quality of its graduates and their strategic partnerships.

SQU is governed under four Deanships: Dean for Admission and Registration, Dean for Student Affairs, Dean of Postgraduate Studies and Dean of Research. The university offers nine support centres (Preparatory Studies, Information Systems, Education Technology, Career Guidance, Student Counselling, Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Independent Learning, Community Service and Continuing Education, Human Resources Development) as well as a total of 13 research centres and seven research chairs.

According to the SER, SQU follows a credit system whereby students enrolled in different programmes must finish several requested credit hours to graduate, which are according to their specified courses in their study plans. Extra credits can be taken. The university has a strong focus on advising and counselling services as an integral part of the semester credit system by providing students with information and guidance to pursue their academic studies.

The Tourism programme is part of the College of the Arts and Social Sciences which was established in 1987 and comprises of 11 departments. The programme itself has been running under the Tourism Department since the fall semester of 2001 and currently admits between 30-40 students per academic year with an aim to contribute to the development of tourism in the Sultanate of Oman. Its vision is described in the SER as striving to become a both national as well as international centre of excellence in teaching, to provide an outstanding tourism and hospitality education for the undergraduate programme students by complying with international standards.

The programme was internationally accredited by AQAS in 2016 with no conditions.

#### IV. Assessment of the study programme

##### 1. Quality of the curriculum

###### **Bachelor degree**

*The intended learning outcomes of the programme are defined and available in published form. They reflect both academic and labour-market requirements and are up-to-date with relation to the relevant field. The design of the programme supports achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

*The academic level of graduates corresponds to the requirements of the appropriate level of the European Qualifications Framework.*

*The curriculum's design is readily available and transparently formulated.*

[ESG 1.2]

##### **Description**

The Bachelor's programme Tourism is an eight semester-programme consisting of 120 credit hours (CH). The curriculum consists of University Requirements (6 CH), University Electives (6 CH), College Requirements (11 CH), College Electives (3 CH), Major Requirements (34 CH), Major Electives (consisting of 6 language courses and 2 elective courses, 24 CH) and Specialisation Requirements (36 CH).

University Requirement courses are mandatory for all students at SQU. They cover three courses: Arabic, Oman and Islam Civilisation and Oman: State and People. Accompanying these courses are the three University Elective Courses, allowing students the freedom to select courses based on their interests.

This structure is also applicable at the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) level, where College Requirement Courses are also mandatory and cover four courses: Arabic Language Skills 1, Arabic Language Skills 2, Advanced Computer Skills and Critical Thinking and Problem Solving. Students should furthermore complete one College Elective Course, with these courses being a bit more specific to the field of social sciences and arts.

The remaining 94 CH of the curriculum are filled with courses specific to the Tourism programme and are divided into the following categories: Major Requirements (of which two credited summer internships are a part of), Major Electives and Specialisation Requirements. Usually, students are required to finish their University Requirements, College Requirements and Major Requirements during the first four semesters before receiving the Specialisation Requirements courses in one of the specialisations offered, namely Tourism Management or Hospitality Management for the remaining four semesters.

Courses offered are a combination of theoretical (e.g. Tourism Planning), professional (e.g. Airlines Management, Front Office Management), interdisciplinary (e.g. Tourism Marketing, Feasibility Studies), as well as general courses (e.g. University Electives).

To reach the departmental goal of combining general management knowledge with specific skills required in the tourism and hospitality industry, five intended learning outcomes were formulated in the SER:

- Provide students with an academic foundation and real-life experience for a successful career in tourism and hospitality.
- Improve students' ability to exercise judgement and critically analyse situations and develop alternatives.
- Develop students' leadership and management skills, capability for career planning, goal setting and team-building.
- Develop students' understanding of tourism and hospitality laws and ethical aspects.
- Improve students' written, oral and non-verbal communication skills and usage of information technologies.

According to the SER, the course descriptions reflect the abovementioned ILOs with courses specific to the programme covering aspects related to the ILOs (e.g. courses like "Event Management", "IT Applications in Tourism", "Economics of Tourism", "Airlines Operations and Management", "Service in Hospitality", "Front Office Operations and Management" and "Managerial Accounting for Hospitality") resulting in graduates equipped to work in operational and managerial areas of the tourism sector.

### **Experts' evaluation**

The curriculum is defined in the 'Tourism study & degree plan' of 2010/2018 (with respect to the courses offered by the department, the 2018 plan is identical with the 2010 plan). The previous accreditation (decision of the Accreditation Commission in 2016) was also based on the Tourism study & degree plan 2010. Consequently, the assessment and the findings from the 2016 accreditation are still valid and are confirmed by the experts within this accreditation procedure.

According to the department's Application for programme Accreditation (dated December 2021) and confirmed during the meetings with university representatives, the department is in a process of updating the Tourism study & degree plan, collecting feedback from relevant stakeholders as well as taking into account the recommendations from the previous AQAS accreditation. However, as this process has not been finished yet (also due to the specific circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic), the following evaluation is based on the study and degree plan of 2010/2018.

The department has defined intended learning outcomes (see list above) and these are publicly available. The intended learning outcomes focus on industry-specific qualifications, but also include several interdisciplinary elements. Based on the intended learning outcomes of the programme, learning outcomes for each course are derived in a suitable way and made transparent in the course handbook. Moreover, different types of assessment are used and they are linked to the respective intended learning outcomes. All relevant information is available and the experts have found no evidence that the workload is not allocated in a suitable way.

During the accreditation procedure, representatives from the labour market stated that they are highly satisfied with the performance of the department's graduates, indicating that the qualifications achieved are in line with the needs of the labour market. In general, the department uses several instruments and channels to assess whether the intended learning outcomes as well as the competencies acquired by the graduates are in line with industry requirements.

Currently, the programme contains two internships (300 hours each). In line with the recommendations of the 2016 accreditation as well as based on comments from representatives from the labour market, the experts suggest implementing a longer internship period (for example, six months in a row instead of the two shorter periods), enabling a more comprehensive and detailed insight into practice (**Finding 1**). According to the Application for Programme Accreditation, this recommendation is in line with the current plans for updating the curriculum. Moreover, the experts recommend to provide more and better practical training facilities for students at the university, e.g. a 'lab' for hotel front office tasks or a kitchen and service training facility (**Finding 2**).

Already within the current curriculum, several courses cover aspects of sustainability and digitalization, which are the two most important general trends not only in the tourism industry. However, from the experts' perspective, these elements should be further strengthened in the planned revision of the curriculum and should be described more explicitly in the course handbook. In particular, students should get more opportunities to gain their own practical experience with industry specific software (**Finding 3**).

As already stated in the 2016 accreditation, considering the requirements of the Bachelor Level of the European Qualifications Framework, the academic parts of the programme should clearly be enhanced, also better preparing graduates to continue their education in a Master's programme. Currently there are few courses that explicitly cover methodological skills and methods. Moreover, students have only few and limited opportunities to apply these skills. The graduation project at the end of the study programme is clearly focused on practical skills but lacks a stronger academic foundation. The Tourism department should monitor that the academic level of the Bachelor's thesis is reliable comparable to academic degrees in other countries. This is specifically important for the students who would like to continue in a Master's programme abroad. The experts request to strengthen the scholarly profile of the programme and in particular to give students more opportunities to actually apply academic skills in writing (**Finding 4**).

Finally, the experts support the department's plans to provide introductory management courses in the first half of the programme and request to move the course on statistics into the first half of the programme, a change that already has been suggested in the 2016 accreditation (**Finding 5**).

## Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

## 2. Procedures for quality assurance

### **Bachelor degree**

*The programme is subject to the higher education institution's policy and associated procedures for quality assurance, including procedures for the design, approval, monitoring, and revision of the programmes.*

*A quality-oriented culture, focusing on continuous quality enhancement, is in place. This includes regular feedback mechanisms involving both internal and external stakeholders.*

*The strategy, policies, and procedures have a formal status and are made available in published form to all those concerned. They also include roles for students and other stakeholders.*

*Data is collected from relevant sources and stakeholders, analysed, and used for the effective management and continuous enhancement of the programme.*

[ESG 1.1, 1.7 & 1.9]

## Description

Following information provided in the SER, the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) developed quality indicators and practices to address its unique institutional needs and relevance within Oman's higher education context. In 2011, the *Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee* (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 and staff to execute duties and follow-up administrative tasks. The committee was charged with developing quality indicators, practices and procedures. QAAC have attended workshops and training programmes centring on Academic Accreditation and Quality Control in regional and international institutions.

In line with the quality standards set by the *Oman Academic Accreditation Authority*, the department is obliged to report its annual progress and status against the following domains: undergraduate teaching and learning, postgraduate teaching and learning, research, creativity and innovation, community engagement, human resources, international collaboration, and student environment.

The progress in the abovementioned domains ranges from 25-100 % depending on the indicators' relevance and applicability to the department activities. The task of updating the department progress and submitting evidence of such falls under the responsibility of *the Quality Assurance Committee* of the department, which is supervised by the *Quality Assurance and Accreditation Office* in the college.

According to the SER, revision and assessment criteria are based on the principles of total quality management and continuous improvement. SQU implemented several tools which are utilised for assessing the employers and market needs:

- *Advisory Committee*: it should ensure an up-to-date level of education that is in line with market needs and requirements. Members of the advisory committee are key external stakeholders and consultants selected from the local industry, business community, and government. The committee also includes faculty members with expertise in the field of teaching and research.
- *Joint National Committees*: The department staff is involved in national committees concerning tourism and hospitality with the committees seeking different kinds of cooperation between the department and different sectors of the industry.
- *Employers' Survey*: The SER describes that a survey was distributed to current employers of the tourism sector (fall 2021), in addition to several focused meetings held seeking their advice, opinions and requirements regarding graduates' skills and competencies.
- *Alumni Reach and Survey*: An alumni survey was conducted in fall 2021 to capture alumni feedback regarding their experience at the department. Questions asked included their skills and capabilities during their time at SQU and their importance to the market they are currently working for. According to SER, opportunities for critiquing current teaching practices and methods were also encouraged, along with the proposal of suggestions for improvement. Alumni gatherings at departmental and college levels have brought former and current students together to share feedback. The SER describes that results were transferred to the further development of the programme.
- *Course Evaluation*: Students of each course are required to assess each course separately using a unified online 'Course and Teaching Survey' at the end of each semester. The survey is designed by the university to assess the different aspects including the course design, materials, presentation as well as the lecturer's quality, communication with students, etc. By the end of each semester, course instructors as well as the Head of Department can read the results via their personal SQU portal.

During the Covid-19-pandemic, this feature was suspended for almost two years. The SER describes that some instructors still include reflective review assignments as a significant part of their courses.

- *Students' Liaison Committee*: At the end of each semester, students are officially invited to meet regularly and report their feedback concerning the programme. During these meetings, students are also informed about any enhancement processes stemming from previous feedback given (as suggested by AQAS in the previous accreditation procedure). During the pandemic, the meetings were held online and involved the dean and assistant deans to discuss students' issues regarding remote teaching.
- *University Practices*: In order to test different aspects of students' academic life, several surveys, meetings and studies are conducted by the university to help with improving students' needs and their level of satisfaction.

### Experts' evaluation

There are comprehensive and appropriate quality assurance mechanisms for the study programme outlined in the SER. It involves instruments with different scopes and target groups (advisory committee, employer and student survey, etc.). The students are also very involved in giving feedback to their lecturers as well as to other service units at SQU. There is extensive information on the progress of the students and their success rates.

The good exchange between teachers, employers and students enables direct feedback to the faculty management about possible need for adjustments in teaching. The course content is revised and adapted annually by the respective lecturers. Changes, even small ones, in the programmes have long revision cycles of 5 years.

Existing procedures appear to be fit for purpose in order to allow continuous improvement of the programme.

When looking at the findings and recommendations of the last accreditation by AQAS, however, the SQU largely failed to implement the suggestions of the AQAS' Commission. This applies to (1) strengthening the role of students in the quality assurance processes (in particular the feedback to the students about the survey results and their consideration in improvement measures), (2) improving the academic parts of the programme (including the suggestion to move the statistics course to an earlier semester), and (3) to support student mobility on a practical (and international) level through agreements with other universities and/or departments. The department should consider to develop an internationalisation strategy which includes measures to strengthen the mobility of staff and students.

The panel of experts therefore has doubts as to whether the results of quality assurance measures are actually implemented as improvement measures or whether the implementation period might be too long.

The experts therefore suggest making the three findings from the last accreditation a condition for this re-accreditation:

1. The role of students in the quality assurance processes has to be strengthened (**Finding 6**).
2. The explicit academic parts of the programme have to be enhanced (see above).
3. The Department must make use of existing structures and support academic mobility of students on a practical level by entering agreements with other Universities and/or Departments (**Finding 7**).

### Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

### 3. Learning, teaching and assessment of students

#### **Bachelor degree**

*The delivery of material encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.*

*Students are assessed using accessible criteria, regulations, and procedures, which are made readily available to all participants and which are applied consistently.*

*Assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

[ESG 1.3]

#### **Description**

The Tourism undergraduate programme awards the Bachelor of Arts in Tourism (Tourism Management - Hospitality Management) after successful completion of a total of 120 credits (roughly five courses per semester) and a minimum cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 2.0 (from a maximum of 4.0). The Tourism Department describes in its SER that quality teaching and learning is very important for them. Professionals from all related fields were invited to share their valuable knowledge with the students and lecturers.

Study plan courses are built to provide students with theoretical and practical aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry using different teaching methods and media. Generally, the study plan courses fall within three categories: in-class courses, courses with practical applications and internships.

In the SER examples are given on how the Tourism Department encourages and helps students to expose to the outside world for self-development and career advancement. For instance:

- some students had the chance to visit Expo Dubai 2020 by January 2022,
- others participated in the UNWTO students league in establishing a competitive idea for developing rural destinations,
- SQU funds undergraduate students for participating in international, regional or domestic conferences,
- six to twelve students are annually provided funded international internships in countries such as the UK, France, Germany, UAE, and Egypt.

The SQU Undergraduate Academic Regulations organises the examination process. The College Examination Committee is responsible for supervising the University and College requirements examinations and ensuring these examinations are conducted properly and in accordance with SQU regulations. The Head of Department (HoD) and the department representative in the College Examination Committee are responsible for monitoring the examination process on the departmental level. The programme uses assessment and key performance indicators to assess and evaluate student outcomes. The SER includes a detailed table allocating each course to the respective learning outcomes and assessment methods used, which include e.g. assignments, presentations, projects, essays, quizzes and exams.

So-called “re-sit”-criteria for graduating students are in place whereby a re-sit is granted to students who have passed all degree requirements but failed one course in the last two semesters, based on the recommendation of the instructor and with the approval of the department/college board or its delegates.

During Covid19, SQU took several measures to switch from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Classes were held online using Google Meet. Furthermore, classes were recorded and made available online for students who might have had difficulties accessing the live sessions. Due to the pandemic, the summer internship was temporarily limited to very few exceptions for graduating students in order to enable their timely graduation before being switched to an e-internship in collaboration with a hotel. For preparation, the three assigned staff members received intensive training on how to use the platform as administrators to be able to enrol, assign

paths and monitor the students' progress regularly. Students were assigned to three groups with one supervisor per group.

### Experts' evaluation

In general, students are highly satisfied with the study programme and its specifications. The curriculum is comprehensive and strengthened students' knowledge and skills. Students feel that they have a strong foundation in theoretical aspects, and the labour market representatives as well highlighted this.

The learning and teaching methods contribute effectively to the learning environment for students. The different teaching techniques used in the classroom have an impact on the competencies of the students. Methods of teaching and learning respect and take into account the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths. Didactic methods used by the department stimulate student motivation, self-reflection, and engagement in the learning process.

Moreover, the department allows students to give feedback and to choose internships. There is an opportunity for students to select the internship experience that they would like to undertake. Thus, students feel empowered as this gives them the ability to search for and select the best organization that is in line with their knowledge and competencies to fit their skills and abilities. Although the Labour market representatives have a positive attitude towards students, the students indicated that they need more industry experts in their education. The practical aspects are a strong point for the programme's improvement. Possible changes to the programme should be to extend the internship duration from three-months to six-months (see Finding 1). During the online-site-visit the panel of experts got to know that Oman Air seems to be a role model for internships and employment and it would be beneficial for the programme if other areas of Tourism, e.g. hotel industry would be supportive to the same extend. The hospitality industry requires more hands-on training. The university should also collaborate on other issues, such as the kitchen and menu management.

Training is necessary at the beginning of the programme and in different courses. As long as SQU has no own training facilities, it should strengthen cooperation with the private sector to offer training opportunities in reception, kitchen, and other laboratories. It would also be recommendable to include more external experts in the lectures, especially from the hospitality industry.

The panel of experts to the impression that students at SQU are assessed using accessible criteria, regulations, and procedures. All necessary information are made readily available to all participants and are applied consistently. Suitable opportunities to re-sit an exam are offered as necessary.

Assessment regulations and procedures are defined, transparent and made readily available in published form to students. In principle the assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, but from the students' perspective some exams focus too strongly on memorizing things. The panel of experts requests that the exams must be more oriented on the competencies which are mentioned in the intended learning outcomes in the course descriptions and strive to correspond to them more strongly (**Finding 8**). Although the programme enables students already to transfer their knowledge to situations outside the university context, methods of teaching, learning, and assessment should support an interlacing of theoretical and practical aspects more strongly.

It is appreciated that SQU already allows a range of different types of examination. The department is encouraged by the experts to monitor continuously that the programme design ensures that every student is familiarised with an appropriate spectrum of examination types over the course of the studies.

During the discussion with the teaching staff, the panel of experts got the impression that the assessors are familiar with examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field.

Responsibilities and structures related to the organisation of exams are clearly defined. The timing of exams is well organised and examination dates are announced in a timely manner.

## Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

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

### Bachelor degree

*Consistently applied, pre-defined, and published regulations are in place which cover student admission, progression, recognition, and certification.*

[ESG 1.4]

### Description

Before entering the programme, all students undergo the so-called Foundation Programme. This year is required for all students studying at SQU it became a mandatory introduction for study in all the university's colleges as of the academic year 2010/2011. The programme has been designed to prepare undergraduate students who have been accepted in the university to achieve the required educational goal outputs in accordance with the Omani academic standards. The programme qualifies the students in English language, mathematics, and information technology, and study and learning skills.

Based on the information provided in the SER, admission to the Tourism Department relies upon SQU and College of Arts and Social Sciences admission regulations and rules. The students are distributed to departments based on the following enrolment requirements: student interests, number of seats available in the programme and English placement test results. The Tourism Department enrolls students after passing the FP and being prepared in the English language, mathematics, and information technology.

To ensure the students' academic progress, an academic advisor is appointed for each student. Some of their most significant responsibilities include explaining the Department Academic Plan, the different study tracks, helping students select the proper courses to fulfil their graduation needs successfully, and providing extraordinary support for under-probation students. All students must visit their academic advisors during each semester's pre-registration period to seek advice regarding the upcoming semester's courses.

Each staff member announces six scheduled weekly office hours to provide academic help for students registered in their courses. Office Hours are usually dedicated to discussing course-related issues. In addition, students are provided with the opportunity to set an appointment during and/or outside office hours to discuss any other matters.

As mentioned above, the University academic regulations require that each course at SQU, with some exceptions, have at least three components (not exceeding 60 % of the total): Quizzes, in-term tests, assignments, seminars, including a mandatory final exam. Requirements for graduation are also laid out in the regulations and include completing the curriculum requirements of the respective students' degree programme(s) with a minimum grade point average of 2.00, fulfilling any additional requirements specified by the degree plan and clearing all encumbrance from all concerned university units.

As outlined in the SER, academic and non-academic achievements of students are recognised and rewarded at different levels, e.g. the annual overseas students trip, the Dean List (which includes distinguished and honoured students from all departments), the abroad summer internship and other events for which students are awarded a certificate of participation.

Upon graduation, students are awarded the title of Bachelor of Arts in either Tourism Management or Hospitality Management, depending on their specialisation. The graduation certificate will show both the major as well as the minor where applicable.

### Experts' evaluation

It can be positively mentioned that formal requirements for admission are in place and made available to future students. Specific prerequisites relevant for the study programme (e.g. language skills) reflect substantive qualities needed for a successful completion of the programme and are included in the published admissions criteria which are available to students.

The regulations for student admission contain a pre-test in several subjects which seems appropriate. The selection procedure for the study programme follows defined criteria and procedures that are publicly available. At the same time the evaluation of the test results is not very strict, so that insufficient test scores also allow for conditional enrolment in the programme. One of the challenges of the programme are that only few students show interest in the Tourism programme so that a high selection standards cannot be applied. Students with good placement test scores can enrol in their desired program, and the remaining weaker students are then assigned to the Tourism program. In order to have a better selection opportunity, the department should consider additional measures to attract more students (**Finding 9**). Such measures could be visits in high schools, presenting the programme to students in the foundation program or making the programme more attractive by introducing more exchange opportunities.

Tourism students at the SQU receive comprehensive support in the progression of their studies. Further, the SQU has various ways to acknowledge and reward student's achievements. In the future, too, it should be ensured that the evaluation is carried out individually, so that group grading is reflecting the individual achievements and performance within the group (**Finding 10**). In terms of written exams, the focus in the future should be on problem-solving tasks rather than memorization (see above).

Collaborations with foreign lecturers are in place to some extent. Student mobility can and ideally should be facilitated and increased though, especially through longer stays abroad (if possible, up to a whole semester). The Tourism department had an exchange programme with Portugal and is implementing another one with Italy at the time of the online visit.

Graduates of the programme receive appropriate documentation explaining the qualification and context of their education is provided.

### Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 5. Teaching staff

### **Bachelor degree**

*The composition (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) of the staff is appropriate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

*Staff involved with teaching is qualified and competent to do so.*

*Transparent procedures are in place for the recruitment and development of staff.*

[ESG 1.5]

## Description

The Tourism department at SQU consists of 12 faculty members and two full-time support staff employees, all of whom actively take part in research projects, consultancy work with associated industries as well as authoring textbooks, book chapters, and articles in scientific journals. In addition, there are five adjuncts affiliated with the department.

Criteria for the selection of faculty members for this department are set by SQU's administrative team based on annual recruiting following an established and formal process whereby faculty members are selected based on their qualifications and experience with a focus on their abilities to teach particular courses, conduct research, perform administrative tasks and contribute to the programme. All faculty members are required to carry a PhD degree, though Master's degree holders are allowed to teach when necessary.

SQU strives to recruit highly qualified Omanis with the best graduates of the university being appointed as Demonstrators and sent abroad for their Master's and PhD studies before they are appointed assistant professors. During the site visit it became clear that some staff members also have a different national background and experience with teaching abroad. For the international faculty members, SQU posts ads on their website and on various international tourism platforms. Applications are submitted through an online system and all applicants are reviewed by the department recruiting committee as well as HR for eligibility. A shortlist is then submitted to the College Recruitment Committee (CRC), which includes deanship representatives and three department members. Shortlisted candidates are then invited by CRC to deliver seminars and attend interviews, with the recommended cases being submitted to the University Faculty Recruitment (UFRC) which is chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Social Services. Recommendations of the UFRC are then submitted to the Vice-Chancellor for final approval.

According to the SER, SQU aims to invite professionals from related fields as guest speakers to broaden knowledge amongst the faculty staff.

## Experts' evaluation

The academic faculty members are highly qualified and have earned their Ph.D. degrees from a prestigious foreign university. They all focus on the tourism and hospitality industry in their teaching and research, and some of the faculty members publish their research results in good international journals. They also perform consulting and knowledge transfer activities for public and private entities. All faculty members are fluent in English and the language teachers include native German and French speakers. The academic faculty is supplemented by guest speakers from industry who give guest lectures at the university or host field trips. During the online site visit the students wished that the number of experts coming from industry would be increased. There was a difference between the teaching staff mentioned in the SER and on the website. These information should be aligned in the future.

Due to the relatively small number of students each year, the staff to student ratio is very good and staff is able to provide adequate support to students.

The recruitment process for new faculty is transparent, with appropriate public announcement within the international academic community, clear and transparent selection criteria, and university committee involvement. In recent years, a number of new faculty members have joined the department, competing in a highly competitive applicant pool. According to some staff members, their main motivation for choosing a position in Oman was to stay within their own culture.

The work of an academic staff consists of teaching, research and community service, with community service accounting for a large proportion of working hours. In the case of high research activities, the teaching load may be reduced.

SQU has a number of support mechanisms for staff development and research. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at SQU supports teachers in further developing their didactic skills. In addition, faculty members are encouraged and financially supported to improve their skills by taking online courses on platforms such as Coursera.

There are also numerous research funds available for which faculty and students can apply to. In addition, once a year SQU faculty members are granted financial support to participate in a conference and present a scientific paper there. Faculty members have the opportunity to apply for research leave of up to one month during the summer. It is also possible for academic staff with a permanent contract to apply for a one-year sabbatical.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 6. Learning resources and student support

### Bachelor degree

*Appropriate facilities and resources are available for learning and teaching activities.*

*Guidance and support is available for students which includes advice on achieving a successful completion of their studies.*

[ESG 1.6]

### Description

Undergraduate students are sponsored fully by the Omani government. Therefore, no tuition fees are required from students. According to SER, all male students living in a distance additionally receive financial aid in the form of a monthly allowance to ensure focus on education without financial constraints and all female students living 100 km from campus are offered accommodation covering their living necessities within SQU dorms. Under specific preconditions, a free daily morning meal is offered to students as well as free daily transport. Additional financial assistance for students coming from lower economic means is also available (e.g. monthly allowances, free accommodation within the dorm). Students with special needs are allowed to live in dorms where five residential complexes are available.

Allocation of lectures in classrooms depends on the number of students in each course, with each lecture being assigned a classroom and courses not exceeding 35 classes. Exceptions may occur in elective courses in which case the larger classes are assigned classrooms in other buildings. All classrooms are equipped with a whiteboard, desktops, speakers, and LCD projectors.

Other resources mentioned in the SER include computer labs (with at least 30 desktops, LCD projectors and printers) for research in online resources as well as for printing their assignments, four lecture halls (each accommodating more than 120 students).

According to the SER, SQU has the largest number of libraries across the country including the main/central library as well as several specialised libraries. The main library offers 1,700 seats, two computer labs, small group meeting areas and one large seminar room. Learning resources included in all SQU libraries are books, eBooks and bibliographic databases (e.g. several leading tourism and hospitality journals). Off-campus access services have been introduced to allow for students and staff to access all needed materials off-campus as well. Students of the Tourism programme are allowed to use the main library as well as their college library with the total number of available books at the college library being 11,000. Services offered include borrowing

books, reference services, continuous information services, guiding and training services and periodical services.

SQU furthermore offers student counselling services such as career counselling and the development guidance programme as well as an independent learning centre offering courses in e.g. technology literacy problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation.

The Tourism department has several e-learning services offered by the Centre for Educational technology. These services include an e-learning platform which provides students and faculty with an interactive learning environment and was heavily used during the Covid19-pandemic along with online lecturing and interactions.

### **Experts' evaluation**

Course/module descriptions are available to students. These documents contain the intended learning outcomes, methods of learning and teaching, assessment methods, and the expected workload (self-study and in-class hours).

Procedures are applied to ensure that course offers are coordinated on both content and organizational levels to avoid overlap. The programme is implemented in such a way that students are able to complete their studies within the expected period of time as defined in the curriculum.

The University has advanced learning resources and appropriate material resources (finance, computer work-places, laboratories, technical equipment, archives, etc.) and infrastructure that is available for the programme. Moreover, the Tourism department has several e-learning services offered by the Centre for Educational technology. These services include an e-learning platform that was heavily used during the Covid19-pandemic along with online lecturing and interactions. However, students are not satisfied with online learning. What is stated in the report and the student's reflection are not identical. During the pandemic, the University switched to remote learning and students did their internship programme online. Nonetheless, according to the students this practice was not effective and efficient. Students believe they require more aspects that are practical to develop their learning skills. The department should monitor the reasons for the lacking satisfaction with online teaching and learning and implement measures to make it more attractive (**Finding 11**).

There are no specific labs for the training of students in the area of hospitality available. Like mentioned before, a closer cooperation with hotels to provide hands-on-training would be necessary (see above).

Beside this, sufficient facilities are available for teaching with regard to room and space required for the number of students in the programme.

SQU has the largest library in the Sultanate that is equipped with several advanced tools and resources. Students are allowed to use the different libraries in the university. During the first review of the programme in 2016 the panel members had to opportunity to visit the infrastructure on site and they got convinced that the learning infrastructure at SQU is on a high level. Teachers should practice different ways to encourage the students to use and benefit from the resources and books that are available in libraries such as books, computers, halls, meeting rooms, etc.

### *Student Support Services*

Introductory offers are available for new and potential students. The system of academic advisors supports students in their introduction phase and also during their whole student-life-cycle. Also on the central level, advisory services are available to students. These services are offered consistently and information on these services is made available to students in an adequate way. Teaching staff members of the Tourism department offer frequent consultation hours and are available to students.

Students who have difficulties in finding practical phases/internships are given support by SQU in finding practical placements.

Students have a comprehensive scholarship opportunity, which is sponsored by the Omani Government. Therefore, students have no fee to pay during the scholarship, and this includes (living allowance, transportation, accommodation, and study fees). Student diversity is considered when allocating, planning, and providing learning resources and student support.

In addition, students are offered domestic and international internship scholarships. According to the student dissection, some students travelled abroad for internship opportunities in countries such as (Italy, German, France, Thailand, etc). Specific consultation offers are available for exchange students / incoming students.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 7. Information

### Bachelor degree

*Impartial and objective, up-to-date information regarding the programme and its qualifications is published regularly. This published information is appropriate for and available to relevant stakeholders.*

[ESG 1.8]

## Description

Information on SQU's programmes, departments, vision and mission as well as activities is available online through their website. The website also contains information on academic staff, their qualifications and positions within the department/university as well as admission regulations.

## Experts' evaluation

As mentioned above, information on all relevant aspects is provided online through the website of the university. Moreover, basic information that is needed by students is provided in a comprehensive and well-structured booklet (Undergraduate Academic Regulations). Information on all courses of the programme is available in a detailed course outline. Moreover, students have many options to contact staff members directly if they have questions. The experts did not find any examples of outdated, incomplete or incorrect information.

With respect to the different stakeholder groups, the department contacts representatives of the labour market and the ministry in a regular and obviously intense way, providing these groups of stakeholders with information about current developments at the department and asking for comments and other types of feedback.

Regarding the admission numbers that are below the target value of the department, the department tries to attract potential students using different channels. It remains to be seen whether these attempts turn out to be successful.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## V. Recommendation of the panel of experts

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The panel of experts recommends accrediting the study programme “Tourism” offered by Sultan Qaboos University with conditions.

The College of Arts and Sciences (CASS) is commended for its support for research and financial funding of national and international activities of staff and students. The library of SQU is impressive and offers a profound basis for learning and study as well as for research activities.

### Findings:

1. It is suggested to implement a **longer internship** period (e.g., six months in a row instead of the two shorter periods), enabling a more comprehensive and detailed insight into practice.
2. It is recommended to implement **more practical training facilities** at the university, e.g. a ‘lab’ for hotel front office tasks or a kitchen and service training facility or to agree with an hotel to make use of its infrastructure.
3. Students should get more opportunities to gain their own **practical experience** with industry specific software.
4. The **scholarly profile of the programme** must be strengthened and in particular more opportunities must be given to students to actually apply academic skills in writing.
5. The introductory **management courses and the course on statistics** must be shifted to the first half of the programme.
6. The **role of students in the quality assurance processes** must be strengthened.
7. The Department must make use of existing structures and **support academic mobility** of students on a practical level by entering agreements with other Universities and/or Departments.
8. The **exams must be more oriented on the competencies** which are mentioned in the intended learning outcomes in the course descriptions and strive to correspond to them more strongly.
9. In order to attract more competent and motivated students, the department should **consider additional measures of marketing its programme**.
10. It should be ensured that the **evaluation of students’ achievements is carried out individually**, so that group grading is reflecting the individual achievements and performance within the group.
11. The department should monitor the reasons for the lacking satisfaction with **online teaching and learning** and implement measures to make it more attractive.