



AGENTUR FÜR  
QUALITÄTSSICHERUNG DURCH  
AKKREDITIERUNG VON  
STUDIENGÄNGEN E.V.

## FINAL REPORT

SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN

# COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (CASS)

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

March 2024



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## DECISION OF THE AQAS STANDING COMMISSION

### ON THE INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION OF THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (CASS)

### OF 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 20<sup>th</sup> meeting on 26 February 2024, the AQAS Standing Commission decides:

1. The College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman is accredited according to the AQAS Criteria for Institutional Accreditation.

The accreditation is conditional.

The College 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 March 2025**. 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 March 2030**.

#### Condition:

CASS must hand in a holistic concept for its quality assurance system which includes that the QA system of CASS should be stronger connected to academic affairs. It must be described transparently how each instrument of the QA system contributes to its functioning (compliance aspect). Moreover, it should be demonstrated which measures lead to which types of improvements, which success criteria are applied, and how the stakeholders are involved in the enhancement processes.

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

1. In order to use periodic review and continuous monitoring without focussing only on accreditation, the panel recommends to decouple the evaluation of study programmes from a strict cycle of six years and monitor study programmes more continuously to implement smaller changes earlier.
2. The panel recommends to exchange good practice and to offer more room for the departments and between the departments to share experience and exchange knowledge.
3. The panel recommends CASS to ensure that the already implemented course evaluations take place regularly (irrespective of the individual lecturer) and that the core results are discussed with the students on a regular basis.
4. It is recommended that the role of peer advisors (advanced students supporting more junior students), and the relationship between this role and the role of academic staff responsible for giving formal advice in

relation to a student's academic progress, should be given some consideration. The process of student advisory should be evaluated considering the experience of all stakeholders and derive measures according to the outcomes of the evaluation.

5. In order to further enhance the quality culture at CASS, the staff in the QA office should be supported by additional colleagues.
6. The procedure that regulates all types of academic review procedures at the university should be made more transparent and it should be shared with the community of SQU and interested third persons.
7. The panel recommends to share five-year plans and annual action plans with the departments and other stakeholders concerned and inform them about the outcomes after changes have been implemented.
8. To improve the balance between theory and practice, CASS should ensure that practical aspects are encouraged and incorporated in its programmes.
9. Further efforts should be made by the teachers to enhance a higher involvement of students in the various study programmes and a process should be considered on how to promote student learning autonomy and independent academic work. One approach should be to initiate research in the seminars, where possible, and involve the students.
10. To reach the goal of internationalisation, staff and student exchange should be promoted. Equally important is the availability of comprehensive information on international mobility, including recognition processes. SQU should offer more English language courses and CASS should offer more courses of its programmes in English or tracks in English.
11. More project-based approaches should be fostered, as well as site visits and field trips where appropriate.
12. While policies exist, their effectiveness in addressing the unique requirements of students with special needs or with a special life situation should be continuously evaluated and fine-tuned.
13. More proactive communication about the recognition processes should take place to enhance the awareness of students and other stakeholders.
14. The research work that is already being performed by many of the lecturers should be further encouraged, particularly with a view to its transfer into the study programmes.
15. To strengthen a robust and student-centric information management at CASS, information in the areas of international mobility and open-access publishing should be made more accessible and the availability of information on the website of SQU should be ensured.

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

## EXPERTS' REPORT

### ON THE INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION OF THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (CASS)

### OF SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN

Online visit to the university: 18 – 20 October 2023

#### Panel of Experts:

|                                                         |                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prof. Dr. Phillip Pohlenz</b>                        | Chair of Research into Higher Education and Academic Development, Faculty of Humanities, Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg, Germany                      |
| <b>Dr. Hala Obaid</b>                                   | Senior Review Director/ Academic Affairs Advisor, at the Directorate of Higher Education Reviews at Education & Training Quality Authority (BQA), Bahrain     |
| <b>Magdalena Lieb</b>                                   | Deputy Head of Department L 1 (Legal Affairs and Quality Management in Teaching and Studies) at Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany |
| <b>Prof. Dr. Christoph Schmidt</b>                      | Head Administration/Head Academic Department, Deutsche Welle Academy, Germany (representative of the labour market)                                           |
| <b>Max Jansen</b>                                       | PhD student of Sociology, Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany (student representative)                                                              |
| <b>Coordinator:</b><br>Doris Herrmann<br>Annette Büning | AQAS, Cologne, Germany                                                                                                                                        |

## 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 member institutions, 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 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 teaching in higher education institutions. The activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither restrained 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 institutional review of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. This is the second institutional accreditation procedure at SQU carried out by AQAS. The college undergoes this review on a voluntary basis.

### 1. Approach and methodology

Within the institutional accreditation procedure by AQAS, the quality assurance system of a university, faculty, or college is assessed against the AQAS criteria for institutional accreditation, which are aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, version 2015). The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The ESG are non-prescriptive while providing guidance and covering the vital areas for the successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education.

In line with the ESG the AQAS criteria for institutional accreditation 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 considers the needs and expectations of students and all other stakeholders and society.

AQAS developed a set of criteria and indicators relevant for institutional accreditations. The criteria for accreditation and re-accreditation are the same. Based on these accreditation criteria, AQAS also provided the university with guidelines for writing a self-evaluation report (SER). AQAS follows the core idea that it should be assessed if the mechanisms the institution chose to secure the quality of its study programmes are appropriate within an external assessment. Therefore, AQAS focuses on the overarching mechanisms to secure an adequate level of the learning process of higher education institutions. Beyond this, the aims formulated by the university in the SER have an impact on the assessment of the panel of experts as applications need to be

seen in the light of the strategic goals of the institution. In the accreditation procedures, AQAS follows the peer-review principle. Based on AQAS' long-lasting experience with external quality assurance procedures and its involvement in international networks when working with experts, AQAS acts according to the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts.

#### *Internal Phase/Basis for the assessment of the panel of experts*

The College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) delivered a SER describing the main characteristics of the institution. The SER explained how the quality management system works and how learning and teaching are organised. 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. Additionally, CASS sent appendices to provide more detailed material, give evidence to the self-report statements, and demonstrate how procedures are organised and put into practice.

On 21 February 2022, the AQAS Commission officially initialised the procedure.

AQAS scrutinised the application originally received in 2021 for sufficiency so that the final version of the SER was delivered in August 2023.

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

Following the AQAS principles for institutional accreditation, the composition followed the basic principle that the panel consists of one professor coming from the area of quality management of universities, one professor from one of the disciplines, one practitioner of quality assurance, one representative from the labour market and one student. Two of the experts were also involved in the first review of CASS in 2016. AQAS informed the university about the expert panel members, and Sultan Qaboos University had no objections.

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 other panel members to increase transparency in the process and the discussions during the site visit.

Due to the fact that the contract with the university was signed during the pandemic, it was agreed that the site visit can take place online. During the virtual site visit, discussions were held with the university management, the QA unit, the Deans of the faculties, teaching staff, and students. During the visit the panel of experts asked for additional evidence on the following topics: evaluation form of the students as an example, evaluation of the practical parts of the study programmes and strategic goals and priorities of the College (breakdown of the strategic plan of the university, action plan). At the end of the site visit, the experts presented short feedback on the main findings to representatives of Sultan Qaboos University.

In December 2023, the expert panel drafted the assessment report, including a recommendation to the Standing Commission of AQAS. AQAS forwarded the report to SQU in February 2024, providing the opportunity to comment on the report.

Based upon the expert panel's report and the University's statement, the AQAS Commission decided in its meeting on 26 February 2024 about the institutional accreditation. AQAS forwarded the decision to the University. The University had the right to appeal the decision.

AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation and the names of the panel of experts in April 2024.

### III. National context

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In the Sultanate of Oman, there are currently three public higher education institutions (two universities, one college) and 29 private institutions (nine universities and 20 colleges) for a total of 32 higher education institutions. These institutions now enrol more than 141,000 students (81,000 females, 60,000 males).

In 2010, the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), was established, which is responsible of the national accreditation process, assuring the quality of higher education institutions and accrediting the academic programmes. The aim of the national 2040 vision for education in Oman is, “To develop human resources possessing the necessary work and life skills to be productive in a knowledge-based world, able to adapt to changes, preserve national identity and its inherent values, and contribute to the advancement of human civilization”.

### IV. General Information on the University

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Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was established as an independent entity in 1986 and is the first public university in the Sultanate of Oman 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 with currently 18,366 students (9,657 females, 8,709 males). In line with the national education strategy 2040, SQU has prepared a long-term strategic plan (2016-2040) to achieve 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” with the following focus areas: undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning, research, creativity and innovation, community engagement.

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 (e.g. for Communication and Information, Environmental Studies, Humanities and Medical Research) and seven research chairs.

According to the SER, SQU has a Quality Assurance Office with 13 employees. The remit of the Quality Assurance Office is to improve the university’s academic, administrative, financial, and technical performance.

Since community service is one of the core functions of the University, SQU offers several services that include medical and health services for patients from all over the Sultanate, and short courses for professional development.

### V. Assessment of the College

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The leadership team of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at Sultan Qaboos University consists of a dean who serves as the college leader and is aided in his responsibilities by three assistants in undergraduate and postgraduate studies, research, training, and community service. All college-related decisions are made by the College Board, which is led by the dean and consists of department heads and departmental representatives.

The SER states, that CASS aspires to become a leading regional and international centre of excellence in teaching, research, and community service.

CASS formulates the following goals in its mission statement:

- provide students with opportunities to develop through training their skills, capacities and creativity for personal and professional development;
- 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 artifacts; and
- reinforce strong and meaningful ties with Omani culture and heritage.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences comprises 12 Departments offering 11 Bachelor's programmes (e.g. Arabic Language and Literature, English Language and Literature, Translation, History, Geography, Information Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Mass Communication, Tourism, Music), 10 Master's programmes (Arabic Language, Translation, History, Geography, Information Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Communication, Tourism, Archaeology) and 3 PhD programmes (Arabic Language, History, Information Studies). In addition, the College of Arts and Social Sciences offers a Master's programme in Security and National Defence Strategic Studies due to the cooperation between SQU and the National Defence College.

At the level of the College the following mechanisms are said to be implemented to enhance research activities: research funds (provided by the University), conference attendance, research leave, sabbatical leave, research awards and journal publication awards. The SER states, that CASS publishes an academic journal and organises biennially an international conference.

According to the SER, CASS has 182 academic staff members, 76% of whom are PhD holders and enrolled 2,588 students during Fall 2015 which is the highest undergraduate enrolment among the nine Colleges of SQU.

## 1. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance

*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, 1.1]*

### Description

CASS established the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) in 2011, which was upgraded to a permanent unit in 2018 (Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation Unit (QAAAU)). QAAAU is led by an academic and aided by a full-time quality assurance officer. The responsibilities of QAAAU are said to be the following:

- Overseeing College institutional accreditation and communicating with accrediting organizations,
- Maintaining contact with accreditation agencies and the departmental accreditation officers regarding revisions to standard requirements,
- Ensure that the quality assurance action plan is implemented within the timeframe specified by the accrediting officers in the departments,
- Provide the necessary procedural, technical, financial, and logistical support for accreditation activities,

- Ensure the effective implementation of CASS strategic plan,
- Assist in the attainment of CASS's comprehensive quality management objectives,
- Act as a mechanism for systematic quality assurance and improvement activities,
- Conduct periodic evaluations of the quality management system,
- Collaborate on external programme evaluations,
- Liaise with the office of programme review to coordinate the academic programme reviews,
- Capacity building by organizing relevant seminars, workshops, and conferences,
- Report to the Dean on a periodic basis.

The SER states, that CASS established the following areas for its research: Language, Culture & Society, Heritage and Omani Identity, Emergent Media and Public Communication, Cultural Linguistics, Knowledge Management and Digital Transformation, Geospatial Analytics. Furthermore, the CASS research focus groups programme is said to connect faculty and graduate students with shared research interests across disciplines and departments/programmes. The College of Arts and Social Sciences states that it has recently created an inventory of each academic department's research capability to stimulate capacity-building activities among research faculty and foster national and international collaboration with world research institutes.

According to the SER, students are said to be considered as actors and partners in the teaching and learning processes. This includes: a) the invitations of student representatives to attend the University Council, Academic Council, College Boards, and Department Boards' regular meetings, 2) the inclusion of students in the QA system through student liaison committees in all departments, 3) the discussion of students' responses to the Course Evaluation in Departmental Boards, 4) the report of the student input to the College Deanship each semester.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU's vision is to be among the excellent universities in the region in teaching and learning, research, and community service. SQU (including CASS) has gone through institutional evaluations by expert teams five times (1991, 1998, 2005, 2009 and 2016) and it has always taken the results and recommendations very seriously and tried to transfer them into quality enhancing actions. As stated by the senior management of SQU in the discussion with the AQAS's panel of experts the goal of international accreditation of CASS is the enhancement of quality culture. It was told that degree programmes are supposed to be accredited internationally to adapt best practices and that the QA system helps to reach SQU's goals because every action will be evaluated based on the strategic plan. The senior management informed the panel that the QA office is measuring the different university level systems, and that the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation is asking about the alignment of the goals regularly. The senior management is convinced that without KPIs SQU cannot achieve its objectives. SQU and CASS understand QA as benchmarking with other universities and conducting external reviews.

CASS has a QA system based on defined strategies and procedures. The relevant procedures, instruments, and responsibilities are clear and comprehensible. Nevertheless, in the discussions the connection between QA measures and the processes in order to achieve strategic goals was not completely clear. It seemed to the panel that QA measures are introduced parallel to the processes in order to achieve strategic goals. But the QA system should not be decoupled from academic affairs and teaching procedures. The connection between them should be well elaborated. The focus of the QA procedures at SQU seems to emphasize on compliance and performance. But QA should serve as tool for development in an operational way instead of managerial oversight. It should be used as strategic guidance and development tool to support educational provisions. The instruments in place should not only serve to measure KPIs (as a requirement of the Ministry of Higher

Education, Research and Innovation), but to gain a higher level in teaching, learning and research. The panel of experts therefore recommends connecting the QA system stronger to academic affairs und make the connection transparent to all stakeholders **[Finding 1]**.

The QA system described in the SER is structured in such a way that it supports the process of continuous enhancement and accountability of the institution. It is described that there is an external accreditation, called periodic review every six years and an ongoing monitoring every four years. Within the discussion some participants were not sure about the difference or dependence of the two processes. The target of the ongoing review at CASS remained unclear. Moreover, the systematic approach in the use of the different already implemented instruments of QA should be emphasised. The panel got the impression that major changes were introduced for accreditation but that there was no continuously ongoing review with the aim to constantly develop the study programmes. Therefore, it didn't become completely clear to the panel to which extent the quality assurance measures support the existing quality culture and the commitment of the internal stakeholders to assume responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching together with their quality assurance. In order to use periodic review and continuous monitoring without focussing only on accreditation, the panel recommends to decouple the evaluation of study programmes from a strict cycle of six years and monitor study programmes more continuously **[Finding 2]**. By developing teaching and learning processes continuously, CASS could be more sensitive to changes in the subject. In this aspect it could be helpful to share experience and exchange knowledge within and between the departments. As the senior management emphasized in the discussions, the vision of SQU is a strong relationship between the different departments and colleges to be able to face future challenges. The idea that one single course should be taught by lecturers from different departments was mentioned. The panel supports the idea and recommends to exchange good practice and to offer more room for the departments and between the departments to share experience and exchange knowledge **[Finding 3]**. The panel sees a strong benefit for all stakeholders in this process, above all for teachers and students.

The panel found evidence not only in the SER but also in the discussions that student experience from a student advisory group is used for the enhancement of the programme. There are student societies in place and students are members of the committees of each department of CASS. There are also consultations of students by the end of each semester and group talks for students. At the same time, it was stated that course evaluation is not widely spread, and that evaluation of courses is mainly based on assessments and study conditions. The panel recommends CASS to ensure that the already implemented course evaluations take place regularly (irrespective of the individual lecturer) and that the results are discussed with the students on a regular basis **[Finding 4]**. The procedure of giving feedback to students should focus less on appeals by the students (considering their grades) but stronger on improvement and enhancement of teaching and learning.

The QA strategy includes an advisory system in which experienced students advise their younger colleagues (see also chapter 3). Groups of students are assigned as academic advisors. The panel was told that each student advisor sets advising hours every week during which advisees can visit for consultation. All academic advisors are expected to help advisees in several ways. This is a helpful additional feature in advising students. There should be obligatory trainings for students on how to advice younger students and some institutional mentoring. The panel strongly recommends evaluating the process of student advisory considering the experience of all stakeholders of this process and derive measures according to the outcomes of the evaluation **[Finding 5]**.

In the discussions it was explained that quality assurance at CASS reviews curriculums to keep them up-to-date, supports a variety of exams (written, oral, presentations...) and makes student appeals possible. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) supports the exchange of best practice with workshops to which all departments come together. It encourages university members and stakeholders to be active in the QA system to enhance the quality culture. There is a commitment at CASS to enhance students'

abilities of critical reading, thinking, and writing as well as keeping in mind diversity aspects. This provides further evidence of the college's commitment to train young and motivated people in up-to-date study programmes. In the discussions it was stated that the QAAAU is responsible for the achievement of the mission and the vision of the university. The members of QAAAU see their duty in encouraging teaching staff to create a positive environment and in providing all necessary resources for the departments. There are the following three tasks mentioned: enhancement of quality of administration, quality of service and quality of academic programmes. As there are defined procedures in place, the panel of experts got the impression that QA supports academic integrity and helps to avoid discrimination of students and staff. Students can complain to the college via a misconduct form and a committee will consider and decide upon every single case. To fulfil this very responsible task the number of members of QAAAU seems to be limited. In order to further enhance the quality culture at CASS, it is recommended to consider whether the staff in the QA office should be supported by additional employees **[Finding 6]**.

Within the programme review external reviewers comment on the study plan and afterwards an action plan is developed based on their feedback. Furthermore, the panel was told that there is a roadmap for each academic department following the requirements of the Ministry of Higher Education and accreditation conditions. In the last thirteen years SQU and CASS have made big steps in enhancing quality culture. The members of QAAAU informed the panel that internal and external audits are no longer understood as an assessment but as support to develop the study programmes in a positive way. The panel appreciates this development and recommends to communicate the procedures that regulate all types of academic review procedures at the university, i.e. External Review, International Accreditation and Accreditation by the Omani Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) more transparently. All groups of stakeholders should be informed about the strategy, procedures, and outcomes of QA, at least in an aggregated manner **[Finding 7]**.

At the same time the panel did not have concrete information about the action plans and their relation to regulations of the Ministry and accreditation requirements. Action plans are monitored systematically by the QAAAU at the beginning of each semester. In the discussions strategic plans were mentioned including a five-year plan. This five-year plan is said to be scaled down with a list of goals to an annual action plan with the most important goals for the coming year for the whole college. During the review it was said that students, alumni, scientists, and representatives of the labour market are involved in curriculum design and reviews. The panel of experts recommends sharing the plans (five-year plan and annual action plan) within the departments and with other stakeholders concerned more widely and inform them about the outcomes after changes have been implemented. **[Finding 8]**.

As there are regular reports once a year, QA processes are data based (quantitative, qualitative) and therefore enable objective decision-making at the institution. There is a dashboard in place available for SQU and CASS management to follow developments on a daily basis.

## Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

## 2. Design and approval of programmes

*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, 1.2]*

### Description

According to the SER, SQU created a set of graduate attributes and a policy for new undergraduate academic programmes in 2016 as part of its continuous upgrading initiatives. Programmes are said to be developed and approved in full compliance with SQU standards. Before approval and implementation, new academic programmes receive rigorous feedback from local stakeholders and are benchmarked regionally and internationally.

The Department Curriculum Committee (DCC) is said to initiate, coordinate, and scrutinize a proposal for a new undergraduate programme, which is then to be discussed at the Department Board (DB), followed by the College Curriculum Committee (CCC), and finally the College Board (CB). The College Board shall submit the proposal to a permanent committee of the Academic Council chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Service (DVCAACS) and composed of representatives from all Colleges and the Deanship of Admissions and Registration (DAR). This Committee provides the Academic Council (AC) with a recommendation. The University Council (UC) is said to be ultimately responsible for undergraduate programme approval. Each cohort is to receive a degree plan and a work plan upon approval. Submitted to the DAR, the degree plan is said to detail the required and elective courses, credits, and other graduation criteria. The work plan shall distribute the degree requirements into semesters to assist students enrolled in regular enrolment in completing the programme within the allotted duration.

Regarding postgraduate programmes: The departments are said to submit proposals to the College Postgraduate Committee (CPC) for discussion and approval, which shall forward them to the College Board for further discussion and approval. This shall then be forwarded to the Postgraduate Studies Board (PSB), chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies and Research (DVCPSR) and consists of the Dean of Postgraduate Studies (DPS), the DAR, the College Assistant Deans for Postgraduate Studies and Research (CAPSR), and two appointed members, after that to the AC by the PSB. Proposals approved by the AC are further reviewed and approved by the UC. The Deanship of Postgraduate Studies maintains a database of postgraduate programmes and students.

In 2018, SQU adopted a new policy regarding academic programme amendment. New changes (programme name, credit hours, new minors, or specialization tracks, change of courses, admission criteria) shall only take effect after approval by appropriate authorities and apply only to newly admitted cohorts. Procedures for amendments shall commence at least six months before admitting new cohorts to the study programme to ensure that the new degree plans adhere to the course descriptions and credit hour distribution.

### Experts' Evaluation

All the offered academic programmes at CASS are designed, developed, and approved as per SQU standards. To design a programme, CASS considers several factors (Educational Objectives as generic graduate attributes and specific ones related to each offered programme). These graduate attributes whether they are generic or specific are developed to be in line with SQU vision, mission, and its strategic plan (2016-2040) in order to achieve the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) at programme and institutional level. SQU is commended for having generic and specific graduate attributes to suit the nature and type of the programmes offered.

From interviews during the online visit, the panel of experts learnt that all the programmes offered at CASS should be reviewed every six years as per SQU's policy on periodic programme review and evidence was provided (appendices SV9 & SV11 & SER). Furthermore, CASS adheres to SU's policy on programme review (SV7) and ensures that all its requirements and procedures are deployed when conducting programme reviews. Furthermore, feedback is received from internal and external stakeholders and benchmarking is conducted at a regional and international level. The SER describes the process of the undergraduate programme approval in details. It clarifies that several parties are involved such as Department Curriculum Committee (DCC), Department Board (DB), College Curriculum Committee (CCC), the College Board (CB), permanent committee of the Academic Council (AC) chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Service (DVCAACS) and the University Council (UC) is the ultimate entity to approve the undergraduate programmes. Then all enrolled students receive a comprehensive information about the programme in the Degree and Work Plan documents as shown in the SER. It was noted from the SER that 3 programmes have been reviewed and 7 more are scheduled to be reviewed in the upcoming two years (2025). All the review activities are administered by the Quality Assurance Office at an institutional level (see chapter 1). Moreover, CASS's new postgraduate programmes offering adheres to SQU's procedures and several entities are involved such as College Postgraduate Committee (CPC), College Board (CB), Postgraduate Studies Board (PSB), Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies and Research (DVCPSR), Dean of Postgraduate Studies (DPS), along with Deanship of Admissions and Registration (DAR) as explained in the submitted SER.

When designing and approving a new programme, CASS depends heavily on internal and external stakeholders' feedback to ensure the relevance and currency of its programmes as clarified and confirmed during interviews and in the SER. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the SER clarifies that the majority of the CASS's undergraduate programmes offer training courses/internships to expose its students to a real workplace environment, and a full-time administrative team is assigned to oversee training/internship programmes. The internship is included in the programmes where appropriate as evident in the BA in Translation Programme (SV9).

The SER clarifies that all newly admitted students to CASS students have to enrol in a General Foundation Programme (GFP) which is a national requirement for undergraduate admission after taking placement tests; details about its admission is explained in detail in the SER. The GFP programme consists of Mathematics and IT, and both are provided in Arabic for Arabic-medium specializations and in English for English-medium specializations. Furthermore, to ensure smooth transition into the courses, SQU/CASS adheres to the national requirement by offering a foundation programme in English Language. The English Foundation Programme consists of two levels entitled 'Foundation Program English Language (FPEL)' and lasts for 15 weeks; and after successful completion students pursue their credit hours as evident in the BA in English Language and Literature programme (SV9). The panel of experts studied samples of the provided study plans and noticed the variety of the offered courses to ensure that these courses suit the nature of the programmes offered and provide suitable students workload (SV9). The panel has no concerns regarding the learning process of the students because the programmes are designed in a way which allows them to progress smoothly. The curricula of the programmes cover cross-subject knowledge, as well as subject-related, methodological and general skills.

The panel noted that SQU has outlined clear guidelines for students' transfer, advising, attendance, students at-risk of academic failure, orientation week, study calendar and credits as shown in the SER.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

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

*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, 1.9]*

#### Description

SQU's programme review process is said to be administered by the Quality Assurance Office. The review shall provide the department with an opportunity to evaluate its goals and operations for improvement of the programmes. Study programmes are required to undergo a review every six years.

CASS has a policy requiring each academic program to conduct a self-study report every four years. The self-study report's philosophy is to concentrate on instructional, research, and outreach programmes. The programme's self-study explains how the programme's aims and objectives relate to the university's and college's mission and strategic priorities and plans for further improving the programme. The process for self-study review is structured according to the PDCA-cycle and includes the following measures:

(A1) the assessment of outcomes through course portfolio, interviews and surveys which leads to (R1) Recommendations to improve assessment procedures for Outcomes and

(A2) the assessment of objectives through surveys and interviews which leads to (R3) Recommendations to review and update educational objectives and to (R4) Recommendations to review and update programme outcomes to boost achievement of educational objectives

Internal (students, Faculty) and external stakeholders (Advisory Board, employers, alumni) are involved into the review process.

#### Experts' Evaluation

The SER refers to a variety of teaching approaches at CASS, such as active learning, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning along with project-based learning. These approaches were also confirmed when the panel of experts met with CASS academic staff during the online site-visit. They stressed that it is the responsibility of the academic teaching staff to select the approaches that suit the type and nature of the programme that they teach in order to ensure the achievement of the ILOs. Moodle is also used as an e-learning platform to support the delivery of the programmes. Despite the above mentioned, it is worth noting that interviewed students highlighted that some programmes ought to incorporate a balance between theory and practice as the latter is sometimes very limited. Therefore, the panel of experts recommends that CASS should ensure that practical aspects are encouraged and incorporated in its programmes when conducting programme review **[Finding 9]**.

SQU started its periodic programme review cycle in 2014 and since then the Quality Assurance Office is in charge of conducting it. As per SQU's procedure each academic programme should be periodically reviewed in a six-year cycle. From 2015-2020 three programmes went through this periodic review cycle, namely English Language and Literature, (BA), Arabic Language and Literature (BA) and Translation (BA). Currently, 7 programmes are to be done by 2025 as per the submitted SER and the provided evidence (annex SV11). In the discussion with academic staff, the panel of experts was informed that the six years period is linked to the accreditation at SQU's level. Although the panel is satisfied that SQU/ CASS initiated this periodic review; yet the experts recommend that SQU/CASS should uncouple itself with this period and reduce the duration to a

four-year cycle after the graduation of the first cohort of each programme as per regional and international common practice (see Finding 2).

SQU has a procedure for another kind of programme review every four years entitled 'on-going review' and CASS adheres to implementing it; during which each academic programme should compose a self-study report to evaluate the achievements of the Programme Educational Objectives (PEOs) and ILOs. During discussion with the panel of experts, students confirmed their participation in the programmes review and highlighted that sometimes they suggest new courses to be introduced. Employers are also involved in enhancing the programme delivery as CASS elicits their feedback and incorporates their suggestions and recommendations into the revised curriculum as explained during interviews. The panel of experts is of the view that SQU/CASS is commended for involving its internal and external stakeholders when reviewing its programmes.

It is worth noting that the review tackles several aspects/items such as to aims, objectives, curriculum, assessments, instruction, and support services as shown in the SER. Once the revised programme has been approved by the concerned entities, the department has a period of at least six months to prepare and adjust the revised programme before offering it to the newly admitted students. Despite the above mentioned, the panel is of the view that SQU/CASS should reconsider the duration of the on-going review and make it a one-year review cycle during which each programme is allowed to introduce slight changes and update the topics along with the ILOs whereas drastic/major changes are left for the periodic review. Therefore, the panel of experts suggests that SQU/CASS should choose a one year period for the programme review instead of conducting it in a four-year cycle to ensure the currency and relevancy of its programmes to the labour market needs (see Finding 2).

## Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

## 4. Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students

*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, 1.3]

## Description

The SER states, that CASS students must complete the standard core general education requirement modules. Before enrolling in their study programme, undergraduate students must complete the Foundation Program (FP) requirements. Depending on the discipline, they may graduate with a major, a minor, or a major with a specialization. The university's objectives of cultural orientation, social engagement, and solid moral attainment are said to be addressed through required courses (Arabic language, Oman and Islamic Civilization, and Oman: State and People) and three elective courses selected from a suite of two-credit courses covering a variety of disciplines. Elective courses are said to cover a range of areas, including creative writing, innovation and entrepreneurship, research methodology, and ethics. According to the SER, core and elective courses in the Bachelor programmes include a final year project to achieve the objectives of critical thinking, problem-solving, lifelong learning, and creativity.

To graduate from the College of Arts and Social Sciences with a Bachelor's degree, students have to complete a total of 120 credit hours, except in the English Language, Translation, and Music programmes, where students are required to complete 126 credit hours.

The SER states that CASS uses the following learning methods: Active learning and inquiry-based learning, in which students participate in the learning process in various forms such as oral presentations, projects or posters; cooperative learning, in which a group of students collaborates on a project in order to gain a better understanding of the subject; project-based learning, or a graduation project typically offered in the final year and completed independently by a student under the supervision of a faculty member; experiential and real-world learning; research training with relevant methodologies, data analysis and interpretation courses.

Final examinations are set for the end of every semester and are said to be coordinated centrally, while continuous assessment activities such as quizzes, tests, and other kinds of assessment are organized by individual instructors for one-section courses.

Students are said to be informed of the course's assessment procedures at the first lecture and are given a copy of the course outline. A final grade in a course is said to be calculated using continuous evaluation of student progress toward course objectives, with at least three assessed components contributing and no single component carrying more than 60% of the weight. The letter grades A, B, C, D, and F indicate the overall level of achievement of a course's objectives.

In the SER it is described that certain students have the opportunity to assist faculty members within their research projects funded by internal and external grants.

The policy for Undergraduate Academic Assessment includes a regulation on how to appeal against given grades. Students are allowed to sit with the instructor and discuss the grade and the feedback. If the student is not satisfied with the feedback, they can make an official appeal. In this case, the student will be requested to complete the Grade Appeal Form and forward it to a "Grade Appeal Committee". The Committee may, if necessary, invite the instructor of the relevant course and the student to clarify the situation.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The formal requirements for admission to study at CASS/SQU maintains a commendable commitment to ensuring transparent and accessible admission requirements for prospective students. This transparency is pivotal in upholding principles of equity, as it enables all potential candidates to have an equal and fair chance in the admissions process. Course descriptions are available not only in printed form but also online, enhancing accessibility and transparency. A good balance between course description and the content of the courses is vital to provide students with accurate expectations of their academic journey. The panel checked several course descriptions and got the impression that the university has procedures in place to evaluate that the methods of teaching and learning are appropriate and correspond to the intended learning outcomes.

CASS has established structured procedures for the design of courses. Feedback is obtained from students and the labour market, and the requirements of the Ministry and the national accreditation agency are adhered to. The university has clearly defined policies for dealing with academic misconduct, including cases of plagiarism.

The university has set up mechanisms to deal with issues of inclusion and discrimination. These mechanisms are developed to deal with complaints and any disputes that may arise.

The university follows the student-centred learning approach. CASS/SQU's commitment to a student-centred approach to learning is visible throughout the academic culture of the university. The teaching staff at the institution not only adopt this philosophy, but continually seek to integrate it actively into the development of study programmes. The strategies employed are multifaceted and include group discussions, case studies, literature reviews, data collection and role play on the operational (students) level. Students are encouraged to work independently when the opportunity arises, this applies to seminars and small research projects. Strengthening the involvement of students in research activities can foster a culture of inquiry and innovation.

This not only enriches the learning experience but also prepares students for future academic and professional pursuits. It can be concluded that this approach is deeply rooted and is a key pillar of the institution's educational philosophy.

This educational approach is evaluated by the faculty to be by and large, fit for purpose and appropriate. It is apparent that the teachers try to follow this student-centred teaching style, which is positive. The panel of experts would like to encourage the teaching staff to continue working on this approach. This refers on the one hand to a higher involvement of students in the various study programmes. In this regard, a process should be considered on how to promote student learning autonomy. One idea to encourage the autonomy of learners could be to initiate research in the seminars, where possible, and involve the students. In this way, students could be introduced to different phases of research processes **[Finding 10]**. All in all, it can be said that CASS as an institution aims at encouraging students to become independent learners. Given the high number of well-qualified teachers, there is the possibility to guide the students appropriately in the seminars and beyond.

Using different teaching and learning methods in degree programmes is an indispensable part of providing students with a targeted education and ultimately equipping them with the skills they need to meet the demands of the labour market. CASS has internalised this credo that the importance of differentiated teaching and learning methods within the various degree programmes is a core element in achieving the defined learning objectives. It is evident that the faculty members at CASS develop diverse learning methods as part of a process in advance, from the development of study programmes to their operational implementation, in order to achieve the learning objectives defined in the curricula. Faculty members are encouraged to use a range of teaching methods as part of programme development in general and for the specific courses in particular, and to harmonise these with the learning outcomes defined in the curricula.

The institution's efforts through the Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning are commendable. The introduction of internships as a response to a previous recommendation demonstrates CASS dedication to improving the educational experience.

The integration of new technologies within the academic programmes is an area of great promise. However, this necessitates a concerted effort to train staff in using them effectively. The early adoption of innovative methodologies within study plans can significantly benefit the overall educational experience.

Internationalization is a cornerstone for academic institutions as it broadens their horizons and fosters cross-cultural exchange. Moreover, it can significantly contribute to the quality of learning. The recommendation to further promote staff and student exchange is vital for SQU's/CASS goal of internationalization **[Finding 11]**. This goal can be reached via different measures: One element is to strengthen the language competencies by offering more courses of the programmes through English and to enable the students to follow more English language courses. Also, delivering specific tracks of the programmes in English can facilitate internationalization efforts. Equally important is the availability of comprehensive information on international mobility, including recognition processes.

The design of academic programmes holds the key to shaping the educational experience for students. CASS has recognized the importance of entrepreneurship, a critical aspect of modern education. This entrepreneurial focus injects a valuable practical dimension into the academic experience, preparing students for real-world challenges. By fostering entrepreneurship, CASS aligns its programmes with the evolving needs of the job market, nurturing graduates who are not just knowledgeable but also innovative and forward-thinking. This entrepreneurial emphasis enriches the curriculum, offering students an opportunity to explore and apply their knowledge in a pragmatic context.

The designation of academic advisors ensures that students are well supported throughout their academic pathway and that issues such as failed courses are addressed (see above).

It is good that the diversity of the students, as well as their needs are taken into account by the SQU/CASS in general and in the specific study programmes in particular. The courses of the majority of programmes are mandatory but CASS offers additional elective courses to meet the specific needs of students. For example, some elective language courses are offered for students who want to develop their language skills. In addition, the various support centres of the college and the university, the well-equipped laboratories and the school's extensive resources complement the academic education.

CASS has clearly defined regulations and procedures for assessments and examinations available to all students in different forms. These include criteria for grading in various degree programmes and the types of examinations conducted. In addition, the institution has established regulations for various matters such as absence due to illness or other reasons. Although the panel of experts commend CASS for the progress made since the first international accreditation, students mentioned during the discussion in the online visit that it would be appreciated to further increase the diversity of teaching styles and methods used as well as types of examination. The panel of experts recommend that more project-based approaches should be fostered, as well as site visits and field trips where appropriate, e.g., in the Tourism programme **[Finding 12]**.

CASS has established procedures for the delivery of assessments to ensure that all teaching staff are knowledgeable about current testing and assessment methods. This is systematically supported by various SQU centres. Moreover, there are clear guidelines for the organisation of assessments providing that not only one lecturer is responsible for the examinations, but that at least two assessors are involved. These regulations underline the institution's active efforts to ensure that the lecturers apply the latest test and examination methods proficiently and accurately.

CASS assessment procedures are aligned with the intended learning outcomes, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge effectively. Furthermore, the institution has established a feedback system, enabling students to seek clarification and assistance from teaching staff. This structured procedure is particularly beneficial in resolving student complaints. This way students have the opportunity to contact instructors with any queries concerning assessment.

During the site visit, CASS has already expressed ideas for the future, underlining the need to integrate increasingly new technologies and innovations, such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality, into the development and implementation of study programmes, which is to be fully supported. The institution recognises the need for additional specialised laboratories in order to make its teaching sustainable. In addition, it is keen to promote and further improve students' critical reading, thinking and writing skills.

CASS has already made commendable attempts to facilitate the sharing of best practice between the different departments/study programmes of CASS. Workshops conducted by the Quality Assurance (QA) office serve as a platform for departments to come together and collaborate and ultimately focus on enhancing the quality of education. This initiative should be extended (see Finding 3).

The panel of experts comes to the conclusion that the evaluation of CASS underscores its strong commitment to transparent and equitable admission requirements, promoting inclusivity and fairness. The institution has structured procedures for course design, incorporating feedback from students, the job market and other stakeholders, along with clear policies for addressing academic misconduct. CASS unwavering dedication to a student-centred learning approach is evident, as the faculty actively integrates this philosophy into programme development, fostering a multifaceted learning environment.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 5. Student Admission, Progression, Recognition, and Certification

*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, 1.4]*

### Description

SQU admits Omani students through the Higher Education Admission Center (HEAC), while the Ministry of Higher Education nominates international students. Students are admitted to the Colleges based on their General Education Diploma (GED) scores, choices, and the Colleges' admission criteria.

The SER states, that students arrive two weeks before the start of the Fall semester for orientation. They take placement examinations in English, Mathematics, and IT, followed by exit tests. Those who pass the exit test in any of these examinations, can transfer to credit courses from their specialization. Students who fail any of these exit tests must enrol in the specific course. Foundation Programme (FP) Mathematics and FP IT are provided in Arabic for Arabic-medium specializations and in English for English-medium specializations. Those students who only complete part of the FP criteria may enrol in undergraduate courses that do not require FP completion such as University Requirements (UR) and University Electives (UE). Students are said to be allowed to complete FP requirements within two years.

Because of the different language mediums of instruction, students at CASS are distributed to various departments through two stages:

- 1) students are distributed into departments based on the programme languages. The students will be distributed based on the following criteria: a) the student's choice; b) the number of seats available for each programme; c) English placement test.

The SER describes that in this stage, students will be asked to join one of the following departments:

- Pure Arabic Programmes: where the Arabic language is the main medium of instruction. These programmes include Arabic, History, Sociology & Social Works,
- Bilingual Programmes: where both languages, Arabic & English, are used. These programmes include Information Studies, Geography, Mass Communication, Tourism, and Music
- Pure English Programmes: where the English language is the main medium of instruction. These programmes include an English & Translation.

- 2) The students will be distributed into General Arts programmes (Arabic Medium Programmes). Students will be asked to register for three introductory courses in Sociology, Social works, Arabic, History, or Archaeology. Students are assigned to one of these programmes based on: a) the student's choice; b) the number of seats available for each programme; c) the student's grades in the introductory courses, and d) the student's GPA.

The SER states that students are expected to attend the courses they choose; absence is allowed up to 10 % of the semester's total time. Students who miss more than 10% of the class are warned; students who miss more than 20% are disqualified from the final test.

A CGPA of 2.00 is required for coursework progression in undergraduate courses. Undergraduates who score below 2.00 are put on probation for a semester. A student who fails three times on probation gets expelled from the university, according to the SER.

Within the College, credit transfer is said to be possible within defined criteria; the Executive Regulations are to outline conditions for exchange and visiting students.

The admission to MA programmes with coursework requires 2.75 CGPA and an appropriate IELTS score depending on specific programme requirements. Conditional admission is available for students with a CGPA

between 2.50 and 2.74, as the SER describes. A CGPA of 3.00 is required to progress in postgraduate course-work programmes.

The procedures for the preparation of the Master's thesis are described as follows: identify a thesis supervisor; write a thesis proposal; get the proposal approved by DPSC; conduct seminars 1 and 2; defend the thesis.

Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are said to be discussed in the first lecture of the academic year, and students shall familiarize themselves with the rules of SQU.

The Centre for Career Guidance (CCG) is said to support students with their career plans and interact with employers and alumni. CCG offers workshops, seminars, and training courses to help students identify, measure, and understand their skills, interests, and personal traits. The hosting of an annual job fair is intended to help companies to learn more about SQU academic programmes and degrees and to meet students.

### Experts' Evaluation

CASS demonstrates a strong commitment to maintaining a well-structured admission process that is transparently described to students. Efforts are made to ensure that the admission criteria are applied consistently, promoting fairness and equity. Still, despite these efforts, some inconsistencies may occasionally arise. Continuous monitoring and improvement in this area is essential to maintain a high level of consistency in terms of updating and enhancing the transparency and accessibility of the admission process. CASS offers comprehensive orientation programmes for new students, introducing them to both the institution and the various study programmes. This proactive approach helps students acclimate smoothly to their academic journey. Moreover, the institution actively monitors the progression of students, enabling timely interventions and support for those who face challenges during their academic trajectories. Given the synthesis of information provided in the SER (focused primarily on the role of the academic advisor, i.e. faculty members) and during the site visit (focused mainly on the role of the student advisor, i.e. experienced students), it is particularly important to ensure a clear division of tasks between those two groups of advisors. This means that it is essential to make sure that student advisors do not have encounter an excessive workload and that their role does not exert too much influence on the academic path of the students they advise, as such tasks should be covered by individuals with sufficient pedagogical training, i.e. faculty members (see Finding 5).

CASS has established policies to support equal opportunities for students facing specific challenges, including students with children, students with disabilities, or students with specific social backgrounds. This approach promotes inclusivity and diversity within the student body. While policies exist, their effectiveness in addressing the unique needs of these students should be continuously evaluated and fine-tuned **[Finding 13]**. Continual assessment of these policies and their impact is essential to maintaining and improving these mechanisms. Training for academic staff and the involvement of additional professionals should always be considered as the existing efforts seem to be primarily centralized in a specialized unit on the faculty level.

Furthermore, CASS supports student mobility, facilitating opportunities for international experiences and academic exchange. This approach aligns with the institution's goal of providing a broader educational perspective and a study programme that includes tourism and communication. Still, the participation of CASS students in international mobility programmes could be further encouraged (see above). Identifying and addressing potential barriers to participation is crucial to ensure that students benefit from these opportunities. While the introduction to the institution and its programmes seems to be well-structured, occasional gaps in providing detailed information or support for specific programmes have been noted, e.g., concerning information on international exchange opportunities. Addressing these gaps will further enhance students' study experiences (see Finding 11).

CASS has established procedures for recognizing external knowledge and skills, contributing to students' individualized educational journey. The institution's willingness to collaborate with external organizations is commendable. However, there may be a need for more proactive communication with students regarding these recognition processes since enhancing awareness and clarity can streamline the recognition of external learning experiences **[Finding 14]**. Beyond that, it should be ensured that CASS continues to remain in touch with graduates who have entered the job market, to gain knowledge about their experiences and include it in its support for current students **[Finding 15]**. Continuous refinement of the processes and policies of quality assurance in place at CASS could enhance the overall student experience. To achieve this, CASS should ensure that admission and recognition criteria are applied consistently and try to explore options for greater student mobility within and outside the institution. Here, CASS should also strengthen its internationalization efforts, e.g., by increasing the number of courses taught in English in the programmes, offering more English language courses for students, establishing closer partnerships with universities abroad, and actively promoting information on international mobility options to staff and students (see Finding 11). Implementing a systematic assessment of internationalization initiatives at CASS and continuously adapting strategies based on the impact assessment could also promote internationalization and enrich the overall educational experience at CASS.

In conclusion, the comprehensive approach to student admission, progression, recognition, and certification (including a transcript of records that is handed to students upon graduation) at CASS highlights a strong commitment to transparency, consistency, support for diverse student needs, and a broad perspective on education. However, there are specific areas for improvement to ensure that these objectives are fully met. The approaches listed above could facilitate greater student and staff mobility, promote a diverse and globally informed curriculum, and foster a more dynamic learning environment that aligns with international standards in higher education. However, these recommendations should be seen as opportunities for growth and enhancement, recognizing that ongoing efforts are already in place. Furthermore, efforts to improve students' participation in the development of programmes, methods of exams, and course content should be a priority. These enhancements will contribute to an enriched educational environment and further elevate the quality of students' experience at CASS.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 6. Teaching Staff

*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, 1.5]*

### Description

The SER of SQU describes a mechanism for staff development which is following three steps: staff planning, recruitment and selection, training, and performance management. There are two different policies for hiring academic staff: 1) permanent Omani academic staff to enhance the number of highly qualified local staff, 2) international academic staff.

The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning was established to facilitate, advance, and share best practices in teaching and learning across the university and has appointed fellows with competence in contemporary teaching methodologies to serve as focal points within their respective colleagues and the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS), coordinating the Centre's operations with their units. Faculty members are said

to be encouraged to participate in international teaching and learning training courses, workshops, and conferences.

Each faculty is said to have the opportunity to apply for research funds. According to the SER, both academic and non-academic staff members are allowed to participate in fully sponsored international conferences, workshops and training courses.

Omani staff members are sent to international programmes in different areas of the world to earn their Master's and PhD degrees and are also allowed to have a sabbatical leave for research purposes. According to the SER, academics are encouraged to be part of research teams as well as related community service activities. The academic staff performance is said to be evaluated regularly.

### Experts' Evaluation

The university is devoting its activities to the establishment and further development of a quality culture. The university's eagerness to excel in this regard has become very obvious throughout different discussions with the panel of experts during the online site visit. As an underlying principle for achieving quality culture, the university has developed an understanding of what quality in teaching and learning actually means in its context. Regardless of the different academic cultures which may vary over the disciplines, student-centred learning is highly appreciated as an educational aim and strategy. Moreover, the university is expecting their teaching staff to be "passionate and to bring in an attitude as a teacher". At the level of a specific understanding of what quality means to the university and the college, teaching staff reported that an entrepreneurial mind-set is a highly valued educational aim throughout the different departments of the university.

Bearing this scope in mind, the university's quality culture also refers to the university's activities in the field of teaching staff recruitment, and it relates the applied policies for appointing and further professionalising the teaching staff body to these particular aims. The university has established a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning whose offerings are at the disposal of its academic departments. The CPD offerings of the Centre introduce SQU teaching staff to a range of teaching and learning formats in order to professionalise their educational activities. This refers both to actual teaching in up-to-date formats, and to the continuous revision of study programmes, e.g., with regard to its connectivity with labour market requirements. This form of institutionalising a space for collegial exchange on development needs in the area of teaching and learning is a clear signal for a well-functioning quality culture and the high priority that teaching and learning enjoy at the University.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that the intensive utilisation of the Centre's provision remains a continuous task. Teachers need to be encouraged to engage in a community of practice (as is intended by the Centre), in order to disseminate the different approaches to professionalising their teaching activities to the entirety of the academic staff. At least in some cases, teachers' understanding of their relationship to students is rather characterised by hierarchies between teachers and learners than by a collegial spirit, in which the learners are considered to be novices of the universal academic endeavour, and accepted parts of the academic community. Instead, students reported that student research projects are in some cases not fully supported which is hampering the full achievement of the mission to provide student-centred learning and to create an academic mind-set in students. It thus is recommended to the College to make sure at an institutional level – e.g., via the curricula and syllabi of the study programmes – that students are granted with opportunities to develop a capacity for performing independent academic work (see Finding 10).

With regard to the strategies for assessing learning results and performance of the students, CASS has a well-elaborated range of instruments. There is a possibility for students to render appeals, there is the option to

repeat assessments, and the formats for assessing student learning are varying according to the different types of the respectively connected teaching process.

The quality of teaching and learning is subject to continuous evaluation. The university and the college have means at hand which have proven to be suitable. Students are periodically asked for their feedback and – according to their appraisal – do have the feeling that their voice is heard. This is noteworthy with regard to developing a quality culture: Either side of the teaching and learning process, teachers and learners, are engaged in a joint evaluation approach. As a result, not only do students feel appreciated as providers of a feedback that is noted, but the teachers also see themselves well represented in the university's mechanisms for the continuous revision of study programmes. They are an active part of the respective procedures and enjoy the opportunity to get involved in updating the study programmes. In sum, the evaluation activities that are employed at college and university level do have the potential to contribute to the ultimate aim of establishing a quality culture, since they involve the participating stakeholders as active designers of their working conditions, instead of presenting themselves as a mere auditing tool.

Considering the twofold nature of academics' task portfolio in research and teaching, the university does the best it can to encourage teachers' active participation in international conferences. The further cultivation of this approach is strongly recommended. Firstly, because the transfer of research work into teaching is promoted as a valuable asset of modern teaching and learning in higher education, and secondly, because the university and college are competing with universities in the neighbouring countries who are actively addressing the Omani academic workforce. Since these are economically very attractive, other assets, such as an inspiring academic working environment should be maintained and further developed. The research work that is already being performed by many of the lecturers should be further encouraged, particularly with a view to its transfer into the study programmes (in the sense of student-centred learning and research-based learning strategies) **[Finding 16]**. Given the teaching load of 9-12 weekly hours, this seems to be an achievable goal. The balance of the tasks is supervised by the university's and college's boards, in order to make sure that there is no teaching overload of individual teachers. (It has not become fully clear, who exactly is responsible for this operational task in the University's administration.)

In sum, the provided information on the criterion draws a picture of a well-established strategy for recruiting, appointing and further developing the teaching staff and its capacities. It can thus be considered as fulfilled. Recommendations refer to establishing and expanding a community of practice among the teaching staff in order to disseminate the benefits of any individual professionalisation process to the teaching staff body in its entirety (see Finding 3). Furthermore, the lecturers' participation in research activities and the transfer of respective outcomes to their teaching activities should be considered to be an ongoing strategic task.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 7. Learning Resources and Student Support

*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, 1.6]*

## Description

Sultan Qaboos University tries to promote an active learning environment to ensure academic success for all students by making the following resources available:

Physical infrastructure: SQU offers classrooms with a centralized cooling system equipped with projectors and sound equipment. The laboratories are said to be equipped with cutting-edge technology and software to build students' creative talents. SQU main library is Oman's largest and provides a comprehensive range of print and electronic materials, services, and modern facilities and infrastructure.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences has a specialist library in the arts and humanities. Furthermore, CASS operates its own bookstore, which shall stock textbooks for the majority of courses. The list of recommended textbooks is said to be revised annually based on comments from academic staff.

A special needs lab with all the necessary facilities and equipment was set up at the College of Arts and Social Sciences in 2009. The college renovated the main building in 2019 with a track system designed for visually impaired students.

IT infrastructure: The SER describes that SQU provides email accounts, wireless internet access via eduroam, and an e-learning platform.

Social environment: SQU offers recreational facilities, a diverse array of student services, sports infrastructure, coffee shops, and catering.

Welfare infrastructure: Sultan Qaboos University established the Student Counseling Centre in 1999 with the mission of providing counselling, academic, educational, psychological, social, and cultural services.

Furthermore, SQU states that it has a variety of specialist centres to assist students with their educational needs, including the following: Centre for Community Service & Continuing Education, Centre for Information Services, Centre for Educational Technology, Centre for Preparatory Studies, Centre for Career Guidance, Independent Learning Centre, Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

According to the SER, SQU offers an academic advising process to their students, starting with an orientation programme at the beginning of the Fall semester; after that, students are to be assigned to an academic advisor from their Major Department. SQU states that the students visit their academic advisors during each semester's pre-registration period to seek advice regarding the upcoming semester's courses. In addition to academic matters, an academic advisor may offer advice on personal issues that affect the academic performance of the student. According to the SER, SQU currently works on systematizing and institutionalizing the process of academic advising.

Students are allowed to participate with faculty in research projects supported by internal or external grants. The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, has developed an Undergraduate Research Grant Scheme to support undergraduate final year research projects.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU and CASS have mechanisms in place to ensure the availability of material resources for its study programmes. Students have access to state-of-the-art equipment for reading and downloading course materials, and remote access is available to all students. Different well-equipped labs exist offering students a professional learning environment. The panel of experts got the impression that everything is settled but in single study programmes an optimization should take place in order to strengthen the practical experience (see Finding 9).

Furthermore, the emphasis on providing textbooks for free and utilizing online materials reflects a commitment to ensuring accessible and up-to-date resources for students. Students are also encouraged to suggest new books for the library. These practices demonstrate the institution's commitment to making literature and information sources accessible to students and continuously improving its learning resources. The librarians offer a wide range of services for students.

The institution actively uses Moodle to provide materials to students for their study programmes, which is an efficient tool for the enhancement of student learning.

The internal QA processes guarantee that the resources fit their purpose. However, it is essential to ensure that resources are accessible to all students, and that the students are well-informed about the services available to them.

CASS demonstrates significant efforts to support a diverse student population, including students with special needs. Special accommodations are made for students with disabilities, such as providing accessible teaching materials and classroom arrangements. These practices reflect the institution's commitment to inclusivity and to addressing the needs of all students. The central student advisory service, as well as special consultation offers for students with disabilities or special circumstances, should be highlighted as particularly positive features of the university's support system. This provision indicates the institution's dedication to offering personalized guidance and support to students, ensuring that they receive the assistance they need to succeed in their academic programme.

There was no specific information given on administrative staff training. Due to the fact that the panel has no clear picture about the training and development of the administrative staff, the experts would like to note that the effectiveness and competence of these staff members are also crucial for the overall functioning of the institution.

These summaries offer insights into the institution's practices and commitment to various aspects related to learning and teaching activities, resource accessibility, and support for students. Each aspect underscores the importance of providing quality education and ensuring that resources and services are inclusive and effective.

According to the experts' evaluation, the learning resources and support for students at various levels – from advice and support centres to language labs and libraries – are excellent. Based on the panel of experts' evaluation, there are no recommendations for improvements in this regard.

## Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## 8. Information

*Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities. [ESG, 1.7]*

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

## Description

The SER describes, that SQU has established the Department of Planning and Statistics (DPS) with particular planning functions. The department is entrusted with examining all development proposals and offering appropriate suggestions based on scientific planning principles. Accordingly, the department is in the process of creating a data warehouse for the university so that all planning can be based on accurate data and reliable progress reports for decision-makers to use.

SQU communicates with the public regularly through its annual report, which contains pertinent information on its achievements in teaching and learning, research, and community service. Additionally, the College of Arts

and Social Sciences publishes an annual report with highlights of the college's accomplishments, according to the SER.

### Experts' Evaluation

CASS and SQU have a comprehensive approach to information management that is in line with the institution's commitment to transparency, stakeholder involvement, and data-driven decision-making. The comprehensive information system includes key performance indicators, student demographics, progression rates, success and dropout statistics, graduate employment data, and details about learning resources. The establishment of the DPS reflects the dedication to scientific planning principles. The DPS is tasked with examining development proposals and offering suggestions based on these principles. Furthermore, the department is in the process of creating a data warehouse to ensure that planning and decision-making are founded on accurate data and reliable progress reports. Moreover, both SQU and CASS are active in sharing information in terms of communication with the public. SQU's regular annual report serves to disseminate essential information about the institution's achievements in teaching, learning, research, and community service, underlining its dedication to public communication and keeping stakeholders informed. Additionally, CASS contributes to the dissemination of related information through its annual reports highlighting the college's activities and achievements.

While these efforts underscore a commitment to transparency and stakeholder engagement, there is room for improvement in information accessibility, particularly in the areas of international mobility and open-access publishing. Addressing these aspects is crucial for building a more robust and student-centric information management at CASS **[Finding 17]**. Here, further improvements seem to be essential for ensuring that all staff members and students are aware of the broad opportunities available at SQU. The initiative to establish a data warehouse to improve data accuracy and reporting is commendable. In this regard, it should be ensured that the progress of the project is continuously monitored, and the timetable is adhered to achieve a sustained improvement in data management in the intended time frame. Furthermore, it could be fruitful to assess whether existing evaluation methods sufficiently capture student satisfaction with their programmes, as there seems to be an emphasis on content-related course evaluations that might benefit from a broader approach. Besides, the proper accessibility of all information provided online should be ensured, because, at the time of the site visit, some links on CASS websites were not operating.

In conclusion, CASS and SQU have made commendable efforts in information management, actively collecting, and sharing extensive data. While the regular publication of annual reports exemplifies a dedication to transparency, it is important to further address areas where enhancement is needed to create a more robust and student-centric information management system. These improvements would align with the institution's commitment to enhancing the overall quality of research and studies, while a broader approach to information sharing would further strengthen stakeholder engagement and support informed decision-making for both the institution itself as well as its students and staff.

### Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

## Recommendations of the panel of experts

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The panel of experts recommends accrediting the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at Sultan Qaboos University without conditions.

### Commendation:

The panel of experts appreciates that the QA system of CASS has been positively approached and further developed since the previous accreditation. The teaching staff is very active and engaged in acquiring and using new teaching and learning methods. However, these activities largely arise from the personal initiative of the lecturing staff aiming to progress their professional development as teachers. The college and university are encouraged to expend continuous efforts to support their teaching staff with this endeavour and to continuously develop the structure that helps achieving this goal.

Moreover, the positive impact of the Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning is obvious. The panel also sees the positive effects of the introduction of internships which is a reaction to a recommendation given in the review process in 2016. Aspects on Entrepreneurship are offered for the students which are interested in this issue. The resources available for the students are excellent at SQU, specifically the library. SQU does take care of students with special needs and offers an infrastructure for students with impaired visibility. Also, the development of PhD programmes for educating high qualified Omani staff is appreciated by the panel of experts.

## Findings

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1. The **QA system of CASS should be stronger connected to academic affairs** and the connection should be made transparent to all stakeholders.
2. In order to use periodic review and continuous monitoring without focussing only on accreditation, the panel recommends to **decouple the evaluation of study programmes from a strict cycle of six years** and monitor study programmes more continuously to implement smaller changes earlier.
3. The panel recommends to **exchange good practice** and to offer more room for the departments and between the departments to share experience and exchange knowledge.
4. The panel recommends CASS to ensure that the already implemented **course evaluations** take place regularly (irrespective of the individual lecturer) and that the core results are discussed with the students on a regular basis.
5. There should be obligatory trainings for students on how to advice younger students. The panel recommends **evaluating the process of student advisory** considering the experience of all stakeholders of this process and derive measures according to the outcomes of the evaluation.
6. In order to further enhance the quality culture at CASS, **the staff in the QA office** should be supported by additional colleagues.
7. The **procedure that regulates all types of academic review procedures** at the university should be made more transparent and it should be shared with the community of SQU and interested third persons.
8. The panel recommends to **share five-year plans and annual action plans with the departments** and other stakeholders concerned more widely and inform them about the outcomes after changes have been implemented.

9. To improve the balance between theory and practice, CASS should ensure that **practical aspects** are encouraged and incorporated in its programmes.
10. Further efforts should be made by the teachers to enhance a **higher involvement of students** in the various study programmes and a process should be considered on how to promote student learning autonomy and independent academic work. One approach should be to initiate research in the seminars, where possible, and involve the students.
11. To reach the goal of internationalisation, **staff and student exchange** should be promoted. Equally important is the availability of comprehensive information on international mobility, including recognition processes. SQU should offer more English language courses and CASS should offer more courses of its programmes in English or tracks in English.
12. More **project-based approaches** should be fostered, as well as site visits and field trips where appropriate.
13. While policies exist, their effectiveness in addressing the **unique requirements of students** with special needs or with a special life situation should be continuously evaluated and fine-tuned.
14. More proactive communication about the **recognition processes** should take place to enhance the awareness of students and other stakeholders.
15. CASS should try to **stay in touch with graduates** who have entered the job market, to gain knowledge about their experiences and include it in its support for current students.
16. The **research work** that is already being performed by many of the lecturers should be further encouraged, particularly with a view to its transfer into the study programmes.
17. To strengthen a robust and student-centric information management at CASS, information in the areas of international mobility and open-access publishing should be made more accessible and the availability of information on the website of SQU should be ensured.