

## Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS

on the degree programmes:

- Mass Communication (Bachelor of Arts)
- Mass Communication (Master of Arts)

**offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Oman**

**Based on the report of the expert panel and the discussions of the Accreditation Commission in its 74<sup>th</sup> meeting on 25/26 February 2019, the Accreditation Commission decides:**

1. The study programme “**Mass Communication**” with the final degree “**Bachelor of Arts**” and “**Mass Communication**” with the final degree “**Master of Arts**” offered by Sultan Qaboos University in Oman are accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Programme Accreditation.

The accreditation is conditional.

The study programmes essentially comply 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 nine 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. December 2019**.
3. The accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **30. September 2025**.

### **Condition for bachelor programme:**

1. The bachelor programme has to strengthen its academic character with more emphasis on academic skills that should then also find its reflection as part of the final project.

### **Conditions for both programmes:**

2. For all courses the Intended Learning Outcomes have to be specific and therefore measurable. The distinction between outcomes and objectives has to be clear. Literature lists must be kept up to date.
3. The workload connected to courses has to be transparent. This should include contact as well as self-study time and will enable an easy transfer between the different credit systems.

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

1. Teaching on social media, cross-media, and emerging media markets should be increased and transparently reflected in the course descriptions.

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

2. The MA thesis should be credited.
3. In the future development of the master-programme the needs of management positions in the mass communication labour market should also be considered.

The following recommendations are given for further improvement of both programmes:

4. The process of continuous scoping the market needs as part of quality assurance should be more formal and systematic. It should be broadened and strengthened to include non-governmental employers to a larger extent.
5. The percentage of courses taught in English language should be increased.
6. There should be a systematic follow-up of graduates.
7. International mobility of staff should be further increased.
8. The ratio of students per capita/teaching staff should be improved by hiring additional teaching staff.
9. Continuing staff development opportunities, especially to further develop didactic qualifications should be offered for all academic staff and faculty.

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

## Experts' Report

on the degree programmes:

- **Mass Communication (Bachelor of Arts)**
- **Mass Communication (Master of Arts)**

offered by **Sultan Qaboos University, Oman**

Visit to the university: 22<sup>nd</sup> till 25<sup>th</sup> October 2018

### Panel of Experts:

<b>Fatma Al Arimi</b>	The Media Centre, Muscat, Oman (representative from the labour market)
<b>Felix Fleckenstein</b>	University of Passau, Germany (student expert)
<b>Prof. Dr. Kamel Gharbi</b>	Bahrain University, Chair of Digital Media, Manama, Bahrain
<b>Prof. Dr. Christian Hauck</b>	University of Applied Sciences Kiel, Dean of the Faculty for Media and Construction, Chair for Public Relations, Kiel, Germany,
<b>Prof. Dr. Claudia Nothelle</b>	University of Applied Sciences Magdeburg-Stendal, Institute for Journalism, Germany
<b>Coordinator:</b> Ronny Heintze / Doris Herrmann	AQAS e.V., 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, both higher education institutions (HEIs) and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been accredited by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is therefore a notified body for accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany.

AQAS is a full member of ENQA and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that the agency's 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 both academic studies and teaching in Higher Education Institutions. The activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither restrained to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor to a certain type of Higher Education Institutions.

## II. Accreditation procedure

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### 1. Introduction

This report results from the external review of the Bachelor and master programme in Mass Communication offered by the College of Arts and Social Science (CASS), Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

### 2. Criteria

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

The panel of experts was asked to assess both programmes on the basis of the relevant criteria and discuss the programmes separately, when needed.

### 3. Approach and methodology

#### *The initialisation*

The university mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in March 2018.

The university produced a Self Evaluation Report (SER) describing both programmes (bachelor and master programme). In April 2018, Sultan Qaboos University handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation of the study programmes and an appendix.

The appendix included e.g.:

- student survey results
- students' handbook
- table with Publications of teaching staff

- data on labs and equipment
- academic regulations for master programmes.

AQAS scrutinized the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility and transparency. The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Accreditation Commission in its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> May, 2018. The final version of the SER was delivered in June 2018.

#### *The nomination of the panel of expert*

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the respective discipline/s, the labour market and students are involved. Furthermore, AQAS follows principles for the selection of experts of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA).

In August 2018 the Accreditation Commission nominated the before mentioned expert panel. AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and the university did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

#### *The preparation of the site visit*

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

#### *The site visit*

After a review of the Self Evaluation Report, a site visit to the university took place from 22<sup>nd</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> October, 2018. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. the management of the HEI, the programme management, teaching and other staff, representatives from the labour market as well as students and graduates, in separate discussions and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings by the group of experts to the university's representatives.

#### *The report writing*

Following the site visit, the expert group drafted the following report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS criteria for programme accreditation. The report included a recommendation to the Accreditation Commission. The report was sent to the university for comments.

#### *The decision*

The report, together with the comments of the department, forms the basis for the AQAS Accreditation Commission to decide regarding the accreditation of both programmes. Based on these two documents, on 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> February, 2019, the Accreditation Commission took its decision on the accreditation. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

In April 2019, AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel of experts.

### **III. General Information on the university**

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The education system in Oman is divided into three main levels: preschool, school and higher education. School education consists of twelve years of formal study. After completing grade twelve on school level, a student can join one of the higher education institutions by applying on-line to the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) which is responsible for ensuring that students receive fair treatment and are given the best opportunities available, based on their preferences and achievement in high school.

Sultan Qaboos University is the largest higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. It aims to take a direct and effective role in the social and economic development plans for the Omani society by contributing to the development of its productive capabilities and the best use of its resources.

While the construction of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) started in 1982, the first students were enrolled in 1986. The university commenced with five colleges: Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science. Furthermore, the College of Arts and Social Sciences was established in 1987. Today the nine university colleges offer 63 undergraduate programmes, 62 master and 34 PhD programmes.

Sultan Qaboos University facilities include teaching classrooms, lecture theatres, conference halls, libraries, staff and student residences with separate male and female sport facilities, accommodation for students with special needs, staff and student recreational facilities, SQU Hospital, and a mosque. A newly established SQU cultural centre houses the university's main library, the Omani Studies Centre, Al-Faham lecture hall and the Grand Hall with a seating capacity of 5,000 people.

Sultan Qaboos University follows a credit system whereby students' progress towards graduation in their college/major through studying a specific number of credits in each semester that count toward the total number of credits required for graduation in their particular college. The credit system offers students the chance to pursue their university education in accordance with degree plans that indicate the study requirements laid down by the university, colleges and departments, and detail the choice of elective courses specified for the major.

The programmes are offered by the College of Arts and Social Sciences which has 12 departments offering 11 bachelor's programmes, 11 master programmes and 3 PhD programmes. The College of Arts and Social Sciences launched the Mass Communication Department in 1987, with a focus on training Omani cadres who are interested in joining the mass communication studies. The first batch of students graduated in 1991. At the beginning of the academic year 2004/2005, the department began implementing its new study plan based on the development of academic programmes to keep pace with the rapid developments in communication and technology. In accordance with this plan, specialization starts after a two-year study when students must choose one of the three disciplines offered, i.e. Journalism and Electronic Publishing, Broadcasting Media, and Public Relations and Advertising.

## IV. Assessment of the study programmes

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### I. Policy and procedures for quality assurance

The programme is subject to the Higher Education Institution's policy and associated procedures for quality assurance, including procedures for the design, approval, monitoring, and revision of the programmes.

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

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

Following the information provided in the Self Evaluation Report SQU administration has recognized the importance of having a central quality office to coordinate efforts towards achieving quality in all processes in the university. Therefore, the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) was established in February 2010 on central level. Furthermore, the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) developed quality indicators and practices to address its unique institutional needs and relevance within the Omani's higher education context. In October 2011, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) was formed. QAAC comprises representatives from all academic programmes in CASS, under the direct supervision of the Dean and Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies and the Dean of CASS. The QAAC has a permanent office, rapporteur and staff to execute duties and follow-up administrative tasks. The committee was charged with developing quality indicators, practices and procedures. Their first assignment was to develop a road map for institutional and programmes' accreditation in CASS.

On the level of the department the process of quality assurance included an independent review by an external expert. As a result of this, several measures and adjustments were made to the programme. Also resulting from this review, a Consultative Committee was established in 2009 from a group of media personnel in Oman including editors in chief, TV personnel and corporate directors together with the department's academic staff.

The department describes that it uses KPI for a number of indicators in the fields of teaching and learning, research and consultancy, community service, and department steering activities. Monitoring is done by a number of committees that are active in different domains. These committees include a student liaison committee, a stakeholder advisory committee as well as college and department committees.

### Experts' Evaluation

Referring to the published reports and the interviews with senior management, the panel notes that available information is intended to inform decision makers about student progression and programme management. Interviews with academic and administrative staff confirmed that the reports received from the system met their needs and allow for effective decision-making. They further stated that these reports were relevant to the implementation and management of the programmes. The panel appreciates that the information provided online from the internal quality assurance system is effectively tailored to the needs of administrative staff, faculty and students.

The panel of experts also positively recognizes the policies and regulations are clearly communicated on the SQU website and the CASS web pages. Further information and inquiries can be sought through the different directions of the university. The panel has consulted a rich, varied and up-to-date documentation that can be extremely useful for students.

The course syllabi are stated in a common template detailing course name, code, content, learning outcomes, assessment methods, weekly delivery plan and textbooks. The panel reviewed the course portfolios and appreciates the efforts made to generalize good practices in this regard. Interviews with faculty indicated that the course outline/information are constantly reviewed and distributed to students at the beginning of each semester. As a result, the panel appreciates the spread of this culture and encourages it.

Based on the reviewed documents and interviews with the involved actors the panel concludes that SQU has sufficient policies, procedures and regulations that govern all aspects of the programmes' management such as: Undergraduate Academic Assessment Policy, Undergraduate Academic Regulations, Academic Program Review Policy, etc. The SQU Quality Assurance Office Organizational Chart defines the responsibilities of the different stakeholders (OAAA, QAAC). The CASS has developed an operation plan (to be carried out by its departments), which lists certain activities such as benchmarking, market needs analysis, KPIs, and feedback from external evaluators. Interviews with faculty also indicated that SQU's policies, regulations and procedures are well communicated to faculty and staff and put into practice appropriately.

The department has gone through several reviews (formal and informal) between 2006-2015. The panel positively recognizes that following this set of reviews, an action plan was defined and implemented. Several recommendations were taken into consideration. An internal review has been undertaken by the university. This review has led, according to the HoD and the head of the Quality Assurance Unit, to more effectiveness of the departmental practices and adherence to quality standards. Since then, several well documented and reflected adjustments have been made.

Consequently, the panel appreciates that a clear system for quality assurance and management is well implemented and is subject to monitoring and evaluation of which faculty and senior staff are aware. During interviews, faculty members explained how they implement policies pertaining to the bachelor programme and master programme in communication to ensure their quality. Also, the panel acknowledges the role of the Quality Assurance Unit in disseminating the college policies and regulations and in ensuring their appropriate implementation.

In its interviews with faculty members, the panel was informed that the CASS and the QA Unit conducted workshops and training sessions related to quality assurance issues covering the implementation of ILOs on course and programme level. The interviews with staff showed that they have a solid level of understanding of issues related to quality assurance, at the same time the verification of the course portfolios showed smaller inconsistencies among faculty members, particularly regarding the formulation and the implementation of the ILOs, the teaching methods and the assessment methods of student achievements (e.g. MA6200, MA6230, MA6510, MA6280, MA6460). The panel believes that this will be subject to a future finetuning in the phase of sharpening the ILO of certain courses.

Also to be seen in the context of quality assurance in light of stakeholder involvement, the Center for Career Guidance (CCG) on university level seems to be a good place to bridge with the job market. The SER indicates that the CCG has been established to guide students career paths successfully and build connections with other alumni. The CCG organizes workshops, seminars and training courses to develop students' knowledge to enable them to identify, assess and understand their competencies, interests, personal characteristics, career choices and the job market. In this regard CCG organizes an annual employment fair to allow employers to know better SQU academic programmes and majors and interact with students and staff.

The panel acknowledges that there are interactions between the Department of Mass Communication and the stakeholders (alumni and employers). During the meeting with alumni and representatives of the labour market, the panel found that they are generally satisfied with the level of knowledge and skills of the department graduates.



However, the panel found very little evidence that the department has taken enough advantage of the CCG's potential to collect and use data (through surveys, questionnaires) from the labour market and the alumni. While individual staff members seem well connected with the market a joint/systematic approach to labour market involvement is missing. Certain employment fields in the free market seem underreflected in market orientation of the department. Therefore, the panel concludes that the process of the continuous scoping the market needs should be broadened (non-governmental employers) and strengthened in order to be formal and systematic (**Finding 1**).

## Findings

1. The process of continuous scoping the market needs as part of quality assurance should be broadened and strengthened (non-governmental employers) in order to be formal and systematic.

## Conclusion:

The criterion on Quality Assurance is fulfilled.

## II. Quality of the curriculum

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

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

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

### II.1. B.A. Mass Communication

The bachelor programme lasts four years plus the foundation programme that shall prepare the students for a successful progress in their studies. In cases where all programme specific admission requirements are already fulfilled, the foundation year can either be skipped or reduced. The Bachelor programme then comprises of 120 credit hours what equals 240 CP in the ECTS.

The department has defined 13 intended learning outcomes. Upon completing the Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication, students shall demonstrate the achievement of the following specific skills and competencies:

1. Display expertise as professional practitioners and thereby enhance their employability range and options in the areas of their specializations as Omani nationals.
2. Understand communication theory and apply it practically for effective communication.
3. Recognize and evaluate the relationship between communication and culture.
4. Engage in individual and institutional investigative fieldwork in communication in diverse settings.
5. Employ effective tools for the exchange of information through the appropriate use of technology and media.
6. Engage in critical thinking and analysis to distinguish and resolve communication issues.
7. Create an effective link between the immediate Omani community and the larger global environment.

8. Understand the processes of communication in various media.
9. Appraise the relationship between social, educational, and cultural contexts in communication.
10. Employ strategies of effective oral and written communication in various media to convey information, to work effectively in teams, and to defend one's position to a variety of audiences.
11. Use current computer tools, such as programmes, software, and databases for researching, analysing, and resolving issues related to communication.
12. Design and develop appropriate strategies and tools to enhance communication research.
13. Pursue further education as an independent lifelong learning process.

Several alignment tables show how the different courses contribute to the achievement of each learning outcome. Courses comprise of a number of University and College requirements that are the same for a number of programmes and guarantee the breadth of the education. Department requirements and electives allow a specialization in three different areas: a) Journalism and Electronic Publishing; b) Broadcasting Media, c) Public Relations and Advertising. Different study plans define individual paths to complete the required qualification.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The bachelor programme's curriculum comprises a number of compulsory and elective courses with a total of 120 Credit Hours, out of which 6 CH are university requirements, 11 CH are College requirements, 65 CH are major requirements and 23 CH are specialization requirements. The students' workload, which ranges between 14–16 credit hours per semester, seems to be appropriate and consistent with regional and international standards.

According to the SER and to the academic staff, the curriculum is designed to ensure progression from courses addressing general concepts of media and communication to courses that provide students with the necessary practical skills along with analytic and synthesis skills. Upon the review of the curriculum, the panel notes that the curriculum is overall sound and provides an appropriate academic progression from one semester to another and from one academic year to another, with clearly specified prerequisites.

Looking at achievement, first of all the experts recognize that the bachelor programme is a well-organized, versatile programme which prepares the students well for the different tasks in the broad field of mass communication. Beginning with the theoretical foundation, the students get to learn more and more about how to handle concrete issues of journalism and public relations. The focus of the bachelor programme clearly is to train the journalistic and communicational skills of the students. In this regard and with this in mind the programme is well balanced and the curricular design focusses on this development. As a consequence of this the students are not required to write a bachelor thesis at the end of their studies, but instead have to implement a media project such as a film or magazine. The students carry out the project in groups and have to prove their skills for both the university and their potential future employer. The panel particularly appreciates this practical part of the course as valuable. On the other hand, recognizing the fact that the bachelor's degree also requires a defined level of academic reflection, this part of the programme is yet underdeveloped. Academic writing skills and scientific methodology are indisputable elements of an academic degree and prerequisites to demonstrate all the above-mentioned ILOs. Hence the programme has to strengthen its academic character with more emphasis on academic skills that should then also find its reflection as part of the final project (**Finding 2**).

The experts panel also recognizes the strategic decision of the department to offer the Mass Communication programme in a bilingual way with 70 percent of it being conducted in Arabic and

30 percent of it in English. The panel is convinced that the introduction compulsory courses taught in English were a right choice as this foundation increases the students' chances of international academic exchange and opens doors in terms of potential future employment. Even more, during the interviews with the representatives of the labour market, it was underlined that the students' command of English should be even higher than it currently is. Not only due to labour market demands, also recognizing the broad academic discussion in the field of Mass Communication does requires a solid command of English. The panel therefore strongly recommends to further increase the percentage of courses taught in English language. This could be done by leading more classes in English and demanding certain coursework be written in English (**Finding 3**).

Another aspect of importance is the role of social media – not only in the teaching process – but much more as a subject of teaching. This also applies to emerging media markets or cross-media. In a quickly changing media environment, a stronger focus on such issues should be implemented in more courses and reflected on in lessons. The teaching should address the question: What's next in journalism (and public relations)? It should be ahead of the developing media market and discuss the next generation's journalism. This question becomes concrete in the teaching of subjects such as mobile journalism. Discussions with teaching staff showed that to a certain extent these aspects are already addressed in the classes, however this could not be seen in the course descriptions. Hence the experts recommend increasing the teaching of social media and emerging media markets and make sure this is also transparent through the course descriptions (**Finding 4**).

Looking at the programme documentation, it becomes clear that the programme is subject to a rigorous and well-established review system creating transparency and facilitating content related discussions based on clear documentation. The vast majority of the course handbook is put together very well: it's helpful and transparent. For some courses the intended learning outcomes are yet too broad and therefore not measurable. In these cases, the distinction between outcomes and objectives has to be more precise, and, on occasion, the recommended literature does not meet the current academic standard – the current reading lists should be modified to include more up-to-date texts (**Finding 5**). The panel has no doubt in the leadership of the department and its staff to continue with their course to continuously improving all course documentation in this regard.

Two thoughts should be given to the discretion of the department for further developing the programme: 1.) The programme includes a compulsory internship in the summer of the third year. This is quite reasonable because the students start their preparation for the job market at that point. Nevertheless, it should be noted that students may benefit from the opportunity to come into contact with the reality of employment prior to that point. They should be encouraged and supported by the department to collect practical experience in the form of a first internship during their first or second year. 2.) Strategically thinking the three specialisations were probably the right ones when they were introduced. Since the world of mass communication is ever changing, however, the department should take a closer look at the three specialisations to see whether they still meet the needs of society and the labour market. Besides further including teaching on cross-media journalism and public relations these fields could easily develop to independent specializations.

In conclusion, the experts believe that it is important to underline the well-practised academic freedom within the programme. In both theoretical classes and practical training, staff and students have the possibility to discuss all kinds of academic and journalistic questions. They are strongly encouraged to pursue this practice and to make use of it wherever possible. In this sense clearly, the programme not only contributes to the personal development of its graduates, but much more supports the development of the society and progression of the labour market.

## **Findings**

1. The programme has to strengthen its academic character with more emphasis on academic skills that should then also find its reflection as part of the final project.
2. The percentage of courses taught in English language should be increased.
3. Teaching on social media, cross-media, and emerging media markets should be increased and transparently reflected in the course descriptions.
4. For all courses the intended learning outcomes have to be specific and therefore measurable. The distinction between outcomes and objectives has to be clear. Literature lists should be kept up to date.

## **Conclusion:**

The criterion on Quality of the Curriculum is partially fulfilled.

## **II.2. M.A. Mass Communication**

The master programme in Mass Communication offered at the Mass Communication Department at the College of Arts and Science of SQU has a duration of one year in full time study or a duration of two years in part-time studies, including all required courses, thesis and defence. The programme is bilingual in Arabic and English as teaching languages. For admission applicants should have a bachelor's degree in Mass Communication or a related subject from SQU or from another recognized university. There are furthermore admission criteria stated in the documentation of the department ensuring that applicants have the knowledge background to study successfully. All applicants should go through an admission examine and an interview.

The study plan includes five common compulsory courses of 3 CH to sum up to 15 CH in total. For specialization in the fields of "Journalism and Electronic Publishing", "Broadcasting" and "Public Relation and Advertising" students have to choose two elective specialization courses of 3 CH each and additionally one more elective course out of a portfolio of six common courses. The total credit hours needed for graduation are 24, 15 CH by compulsory courses and 9 CH by electives. The credit hours needed for graduation should be completed within two semesters by full time students and within four semesters by part time students. Following the documentation of the department students should register for the thesis in the third semester after having completed at least 12 credits. The thesis is not credited.

Following the documentation of the department the master programme aims at providing students with the knowledge and skills required to develop professional careers in mass communication. Students are supposed to be introduced to different theories, approaches and concepts as a basis for analysing and understanding mass communication issues. The programme offers a master's degree in one of the three following fields:

- Journalism and Electronic Media
- Broadcasting Media
- Public Relations and Advertising

Learning strategies and methods are a combination of tutor presentations, small group work and student led seminars and presentations. Tutorials shall enable students to identify research questions, select areas for literature review, carry out fieldwork and review drafts of the dissertation under supervision of staff members.

The programme is comprised of credits of course work in addition to research leading to a thesis. For the thesis, the candidate is required to conduct the necessary literature review, undertake research, analyse results, write the report and communicate the results at an oral defence. This work does not necessarily have to be original research but should be a new application of ideas. The student should identify the research problem in consultation with the supervisor, which usually takes place in the second semester.

Three learning objectives for the programme have been defined by the Mass Communication Department:

- Graduates possess profound academic knowledge and practical skills in mass communication with the ability to meet the needs of the Sultanate of Oman and the region in the area.
- Graduates are experts in mass communication in order to operate effectively and professionally in both the public and the private sectors.
- Develop knowledge and skills to conduct academic research and utilize its findings to enrich the learning and practical experience

These objectives have led to the definition of following intended learning outcomes. Graduates know/posses:

- The key theoretical principles and issues involved in mass communication.
- The fundamental concepts, techniques, principles and theories of data collection and analysis in mass communication research.
- A deep insight into how theories of mass communication relate to the practice and their effect in society.
- A highly detailed knowledge and understanding of a particular area of mass communication and its role in society.
- The ethical and philosophical issues related to research in mass communication.

All common compulsory and elective course are supposed to contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, just to mention few from the compulsory portfolio: Communication Research Methods (Mass6110), Theories of Mass Communication (Mass6130), Terminology and Concepts of Mass Communication (Mass6250). All elective specialization courses aim at covering the main fields of the three specializations. The portfolio of common elective courses intends to focus on contemporary evolution and issues in modern mass media like New Communication Media (Mass6150) and Electronic Journalism (Mass6230)

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The expert panel positively acknowledges that the department has done well to comply with the demanding challenge of creating a consistent master programme that combines enhanced academia in mass communication with its application to practical work in contemporary journalism and public relations. The soundly combined learning outcomes listed above are published in the course files and meet the current standards of curricular mass communication studies on MA level. Thereby the department manages well to cover subject-specific and cross-subject knowledge in the curriculum, as well as subject-related, methodological, and general skills. It is clearly defined which elements are compulsory and which are electives, and the order of curricular elements supports the learner's progression. This is visualized in an idealized typical course plan.

With the exception of five courses (Mass6150, Mass6170, Mass6230, Mass6470, Mass6320), all courses are documented by course outlines. The department already confirmed during the meetings that outlines for these courses would already exist and that they would be published on short notice. The course outlines include all relevant information about content, teaching and learning methods i. a. They clearly define learning outcomes for each course, which are derived from the programme's learning outcomes, and in their combination, they allow the achievement of the outcomes on programme level. Apart from the references made during the interviews, most of the literature listed in the course outlines date back to ten and more years which does not represent the current state of research any more. Consequently, the literature lists in the course outlines should be kept up to what is currently used in the classes (**Finding 5**).

Discussions with graduates showed their impressive achievement of learning outcomes and confirmed that they are able to transfer their skills into practice. Additionally, interviews with current students as well as graduates supported the impression that student's capability in English should be improved. Representatives of the labour market stated that students are good in Arabic writing but not good enough in English. The labour market clearly stated the expectation of a stronger English proficiency particularly for Master graduates. The master programme is bilingual with Arabic and English as teaching languages. But in fact, there are only two courses given in English limited to the portfolio of common compulsory courses. Therefore, the number of classes taught in English should be expanded to the fields of specialisations (**Finding 3**).

The experts were impressed by the interviews with stakeholders and staff who both confirmed that government institutions use results from SQU applied research, but at the same time the panel recognizes that consultations of the private sector remain underdeveloped. Representatives of the labour market underlined that master graduates can go for the management of media companies. Both statements lead to the conclusion, that the collaboration between the department and private media companies should be stepped up to improve the transfer of knowledge (**Finding 1**). Collaborative thesis works on issues of private sector companies can be an option. Another option is to tender paid consultancy services based on scientific research. A lively alumni networking by the department could be supportive.

It should not remain unnoticed that currently the master's thesis is not credited. This does not reflect the value of the thesis within the master programme as it serves to represent the achievement of the learning outcomes on programme level. Furthermore, it is a disadvantage for students aiming for international mobility in their academic or business careers. It is strongly recommended to value the master's thesis by appropriate credits (**Finding 6**).

Concluding it can be stated that the master programme is a consequent continuation of the bachelor programme in Mass Communication on a higher academic level. That is obvious, because the programme titles are the same and all three specializations of the bachelor programme are taken further into the master programme. Considering the developments in the field, the need for stronger specialization on a higher academic level and the requirement specializes equipment/staff on the long run, the department should start thinking about strengthening the programmes' profiles by focussing for example on journalism or PR and rename the programme to create its own brand to further strengthen the attractiveness of the programmes for externals. This will also mean not to lose sight of the labour market needs in management positions in the field of mass communication (**Finding 7**). A clear follow up of graduates will be helpful for the department to underline strengths but also to gather information for future development of the programme (**Finding 8**).

## Findings

1. The master's thesis should be credited.
2. In the future development of the programme the needs of management positions in the mass communication labour market should also be considered.
3. There should be a systematic follow-up of graduates.

## Conclusion:

The criterion on Quality of the Curriculum is substantially fulfilled.

## III. Learning, teaching and assessment of students

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

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

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

The department provides a detailed chart outlining which intended learning outcome of the programme is covered by which course of the curriculum. Beyond this for each course, the specific assessment methods are outlined to present how they are linked to the intended learning outcomes.

The SQU Undergraduate Academic Regulations organizes the examination process. The College Examination Committee is responsible for supervising the university & college requirements examinations and ensuring these examinations are conducted properly and in accordance with the SQU regulations. The Department HoD and the department representative in the College Examination Committee are responsible for monitoring the examination process on the Departmental level.

For most courses, student performance in the courses is evaluated using three components: mid-term exam (20–25 percent), final exam (40–50 percent), class work, e.g. research or practical project conducted by the student, or a presentation on a certain topic (30–35 percent). The evaluation tools can be increased in some courses, to four or five components, depending on the nature of the course and the teacher's philosophy.

## Experts' Evaluation

The department offers a laudable variety of forms of teaching and learning to the students. The expert panel appreciates in particular the practical approach of teaching to enable the students to learn practical skills in media production and journalistic writing. This approach is supported by the relatively small cohort size, which allows personal interaction in small classes.

In general, the didactical methods in the study programmes are suitable to fulfil the intended goals of the bachelor and master programme. The expert panel got the impression of a vibrant culture of teaching and learning and a high motivation of both students and teachers. However, as mentioned above, the specified intended learning outcomes of the courses are in some cases too broad, which is complicating the precise documentation of the appropriate forms of teaching and examination (**Finding 5**) (also see chapter 3.1).

The department succeeded in finding a good balance of theory and practice in the study programmes. While the bachelor programme aims to enable the students to work in the media business, the master programme is more research-oriented. The methods of teaching and learning respond to the diversity of students. The common academic foundation programme contributes to a suitable study preparation for every student. Furthermore, the experts are impressed by the numerous ways in which students with disabilities are supported to master their studies.

Assessment and examination methods and requirements are clearly defined and transparent. The academic regulations are well-developed and comprehensible. The academic regulations contain specific regulations for the cases of hospitalization or extreme illness of a student and the bereavement of a first-degree relative, which are accepted as reasons for absence in the final examination. Passed courses may be repeated once, failed courses twice, which seems to be an adequate policy. The expert panel has no doubt that changes of the examination policy are made involving all relevant committees and changes are announced to all stakeholders in a suitable manner.

Examination administration is very well-structured with checks and balances as well as measures to reassure quick feedback and independent complaints procedures. The students are well-informed about examination dates and the academic regulations. The grading and graduation policy is well-documented, and the distribution of grades is part of the quality assurance reporting. The expert panel is encouraging the department to continue its efforts also carry out a more detailed analysis of the student drop-out rate and reasons for student drop-outs and change of subjects. While numbers are no reason for concern, some documented qualitative data might be helpful for future decisions regarding information and policy making.

## **Findings**

None

## **Conclusion:**

The criterion on Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students is fulfilled.

## **IV. Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification**

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

Before entering the bachelor programme all students undergo the so-called Foundation Programme. This year is required for all students studying at SQU. The Foundation Programme (FP) at Sultan Qaboos University became a mandatory introduction for study in all the university's colleges as of the academic year 2010/2011. The programme has been designed to prepare undergraduate students who have been accepted in the university to achieve the required educational goal outputs in accordance with the Omani academic standards. The programme qualifies the students in English language, mathematics, and information technology as well as study and learning skills. The students who have not achieved the required level (Level 6) in English must study intensive courses of the English language for a maximum of two semesters within the foundation year. In case of failure to achieve level 6, the student cannot start the study in the Mass Communication bachelor programme.

Based on the information provided by SQU admission to the Mass Communication Department relies upon the SQU and College of Arts and Social Sciences admission regulations and rules. This



indicates that the university admits the best students from the school leavers of Oman strictly by merit. The students are distributed to departments based on the following enrolment requirements:

- Student interests
- Number of seats available in the programme
- English exit test results
- English placement test results
- passing the foundation programme and achieving level six in English.

Admission to the master programme requires a bachelor's degree in mass communication or in a related subject from Sultan Qaboos University or from any other recognized university with a cumulative grade point average of not less than 2.75 on a four-point scale, as well as advanced English proficiency.

Regulations for transfer students to and from other departments are in place and mainly defined on the central level of the university.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The experts recognize that the mechanism of admission is being decided firstly by the Education Council in Oman – which dedicates the number of students for each higher education institute in the country 15 – and once enrolled in SQU it is on the undergraduates to choose based on the available seats in each major (the capacity of the Mass Communication's Department is 50 by cohort). The role of the dean and department in this process is rather limited as well-defined university wide rules are applied.

Looking at the department role in the admission process of the master programme, there is a little more flexibility while most of the admission procedures are unified by SQU, the department has a clear role in the selection process during the interview in order to make sure all entry requirements are fulfilled and also student's motivation is right to succeed the master programme. The requirements are clearly defined and seem convenient to a wide range of students to be admitted at the Mass Communication Department.

This leads to clear structures and transparent and fair procedures on the level of Mass Communication undergraduates and postgraduates, while the selection procedure might seem to be of limited flexibility for adjustments or changes and – from an outside perspective – might also seem lengthy.

SQU has several arrangements for the induction of newly admitted and transferred students. These arrangements include university-wide induction sessions that are offered to all students at the beginning of every semester (during a week). SQU also supplies all students with the Student Guide and the University Catalogue, which include useful information about SQU's policies and regulations. The CASS also arranges an induction day every semester in which students, including those who were not able to attend the university induction sessions, get to know more about rules and regulations of the college. During interviews with students, the panel learned that their questions and concerns are handled effectively during the induction sessions, and students who miss these sessions were advised individually by the Registration Department.

However, the experts positively recognize that at the level of the three tracks (Journalism & E-publishing, Broadcasting, and PR & Advertisement), the students' enrolment is based on four elements to join a specific track based on: a written exam, the grades in related courses, the students' abilities and choice, and a face-to-face interview. This clearly helps support student success and satisfaction.

Data on the number of students enrolled in each cohort is available, while being focussed on quantitative data. The department keeps the numbers of students and graduates, but at this point there is no systematic follow up or contacts with alumni (**Finding 8**) (also see chapter 3.2).

Regulations for recognition of higher education qualifications are in place for formal learning at other faculties or institutions. The students' mobility for both male and female is well supported by the department and college. Having said that, SQU's regulations do not allow female students staying on campus to leave the university without her family's permission. Looking at media productions outside the campus, consequently female students face harder times being exposed to practical experience beyond SQU. At the same time the panel recognizes the limited responsibility of the department and supports their effort to support student mobility for all students whenever possible.

At the end of each degree (bachelor's and master's) each student is being provided by a documentation explaining the qualifications gained, courses completed, and grades and levels.

### **Conclusion:**

The criterion on Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification is fulfilled.

## **V. Teaching Staff**

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

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

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

At present, the department has a permanent staff of 11 academic lecturers who earned their degrees from different American, European and Arab universities, in addition to one coordinator, one training supervisor and four technicians: three specialized in broadcasting and one in online journalism. A detailed list representing the portfolio of each teaching staff members was given to the experts.

The latest available statistic from 2017 (SP) shows a number of 959 students and 12 teaching staff which calculates a ratio of 15.3 full-time equivalent (FTA) per semester; the ratio of students per capita/teaching staff is 79,9 to 1.

Hiring regulations differ for Omani candidates and international teaching staff applicants and are decided upon on central level. However, all hiring decisions are initiated at the level of the departmental Recruitment Committee. Next steps are adjustments and approvals by the College Recruitment Committee while the final decision is made by the University Recruitment Committee chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs.

The recruitment policy for Omani staff follows the idea that the best graduates of the university are appointed as demonstrators and sent abroad for their masters and PhDs before their appointment as Assistant Professors. Beyond this, SQU outlines that it actively recruits international staff members to complete the academic staff portfolio. The recruitment procedure for international staff is transparent and designed to ensure the academic expertise and didactical quality of international staff.

Omanis receive permanent contracts, while foreigners get contracts for three years which can be extended for another three years. As a guideline 30% foreigners and 70% Omanis can be part of the staff. A three-month testing period for foreign staff is obligatory.

Teaching staff is encouraged by the university, the college, and the department to further enhance their didactic skills. Resources are provided for these activities and staff members are actually making use of these opportunities.

The university supports attending conferences; researchers can participate up to three times per year, and sabbatical leaves are possible after five years.

The university provides different opportunities for faculty professional development to improve staff skills that enhance teaching quality. In-house workshops are offered by the Centre for Education Technology (CET), Centre for Staff Development (CSD) and Centre for Information Systems (CIS). The CET and CIS also support teaching with media equipment and e-learning services on using them. The two centres regularly arrange workshops, seminars, consultancies and advise on designing effective instructional materials and utilising educational media and telecommunications. The CSD also organises short professional development courses.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

It is with great appreciation that the experts recognize the professional, friendly, and excitingly diverse academic environment in the department, a stimulating atmosphere of innovation and an up-to-date technical infrastructure. All members of staff presented themselves as highly motivated academic lecturers and researchers with a broad expertise that covers all fields of contemporary mass communication science. Some staff has been working in the field of mass communication before moving on to academia. Clearly this helps to focus teaching on the needs of the labour market.

Also, it can be confirmed that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure and/or develop appropriate didactic qualifications of the teaching staff. An increase of international mobility could create further added value in the continuous development of up-to-date staff qualification as it should be recognized that the field of mass communication is extremely vivid and international. Particularly recognizing the intention of SQU to increase the number of Omani staff, it should be recognized that the international exchange will remain a key. Hence international mobility of staff should be further increased (**Finding 9**).

The existing recruitment process that includes recruitment abroad is adequately formalised and transparent. It is well practiced and has been established based on general regulations of the university. Particular attention should be paid to the quantitative perspective of staff resources. The teaching load of faculty staff in both programmes is very high and clearly at the limit of being acceptable. The ratio of students per capita/teaching staff is above comparable institutions for the field of applied mass communication studies. Negative correlations with the number of papers and publications should not come as a surprise. The college should make sure to avoid a further increase in the student/staff ratio and consider flexibilization of staff recruitment policies in case of foreseeable staff leave (**Finding 10**).

### **Findings**

1. International mobility of staff should be further increased.
2. The ratio of students per capita/teaching staff should be improved by hiring additional teaching staff.

### **Conclusion:**

The criterion on Teaching Staff is substantially fulfilled.

## VI. Learning Resources and Student Support

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

Guidance and support is available for students to advise on achieving successful completion of their studies.

Financially, SQU outlines it is a free university. No fees are paid as all undergraduate academic services are for free. All the students additionally receive a monthly financial allowance to ensure their ability to focus on education without any financial constraints. All the students receive daily meals as well as on-campus transportation. All female students as well as male students with special needs are allowed to live inside the campus where five residential complexes are available.

The Mass Communication Department provides an electronic journalism and advertising design lab. Supervised by the online journalism technician, the lab contains more than 40 Mac and PCs, a high-quality printer and different online journals and the design software programmes needed to train students in the field.

A TV studio modernization project in the Mass Communication Department was underway to develop and update the division's imaging and editing system to comply with the latest high-quality Broadcast Quality Full HD technology and to be compatible with international studios, including Oman TV studios. Equipment has already been installed and technicians were trained.

The programmes' students are allowed to use the college library or the main library. Both libraries provide collections in the area of the programmes. The library systems allow the students to borrow 5 books for 3 weeks, which are renewable.

### Experts' Evaluation

During the site visit tour of the CASS and the Department of Mass Communication buildings, the panel noted that the CASS provides all necessary resources to fulfil the learning needs of its students. Classrooms are equipped with data show/projectors, halls can accommodate a large number of students; computer laboratories, TV and radio studio, audio and video editing units are available. All in all, the learning resources available to the students of Mass Communication are more than adequate and the experts are impressed by the available learning resources.

Since technical equipment is such an integral part of the fast-changing media world, availability of these resources is a prerequisite to assure that the students are able to understand the principles of handling cameras and software and that they are be able to transfer their knowledge easily. To further support student's in their own journalistic work, in addition to the traditional methods of shooting and editing, it would make sense to teach even more innovative forms such as mobile journalism. Most of the students have smartphones, so it is more a question of teaching them about techniques than the equipment itself.

Also, it can be confirmed that there are sufficient offices for the academic members, adequate for working and meeting students. The online learning platform (Moodle) helps academic staff to upload course content electronically for their students. During interviews, the students and staff expressed their satisfaction with the facilities and services that support their programmes.

During the tour of the library, the experts could find that it includes several online resources that offer a good resource for students to achieve the required learning outcomes. Moreover, there are computers in the library for searching the library catalogue and areas for studying and reading. It was confirmed during interviews, that the students are satisfied with their utilization for the library and its resources.

Students of the SQU have very good financial support – there is free accommodation for female students on the campus, and male students receive allowances and live in their own apartments in the city. Obviously, both female and male students have the same access to the different parts of the theoretical and practical tasks during the study.

New students have to successfully complete a foundation year in which they have to improve their general skills including their command of the English language. If they manage to pass the Foundation Studies exams straight after high school, they may begin the Mass Communication course without having to complete the introduction year. This is a good instrument to be aware of and one which deals with the different learning levels of students joining the university.

One aspect of student support – while equally an issue of transparency – is the availability of a defined expectation of working hours (contact and self-study) for the individual courses. In discussions during the site visit, the correlation between contact, credit hours and workload remained unclear to the experts. This does not put into question that and how SQU is using a credit hour system different from ECTS. However, the exact correlation of contact hours, expected self-study and workload should be available for each course in order to allow an easy transfer to the ECTS. **(Finding 11).** A clearly defined and published correlation between contact, credit hours and workload facilitate international mobility of students and will facilitate future internationalization activities of the department.

## Findings

1. The workload connected to courses should be transparent. This should include contact as well as self-study time to enable an easy transfer between the different credit systems.

## Conclusion:

The criterion on learning resources and student support is substantially fulfilled.

## VII. Information

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

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

Information and data management follows the structures implemented on college and university level. SQU Quality Assurance Office has established a system of data collection to develop quality Assurance Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The College Annual Performance Report (CAPR) focuses on the strategic direction of the college and its alignment with the university mission, objectives and strategic plan. The report includes sections on:

- Evaluation of college strategy and targets
- Teaching and learning
- Research and consultancy
- Community service
- Resources and facilities
- Risk management

A biannual international conference is organized to initiate cross border dialogue and focus on current topic in media research and provide information on the activities of the department. It was last held in October/November 2017.

## Experts' Evaluation

Through its website, SQU provides the different stakeholders (including faculty and students) with various types of information and data, such as: admission criteria, withdrawals, transfers, graduation data, assessments, calendar etc. In addition to these data, the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) publishes annual reports and publications with updated data on its various departments online and offers an online access to a variety of forms for faculty and students. All this practice is appropriate and the provision of information to the public is adequate.

The same can be outlined for data collection from relevant sources while it seems helpful to differentiate between internal and external sources. Internal data collection is well structured and also managed through a well-established internal quality assurance system. Considering outside sources, it was already mentioned that individuals of the department are very well connected to the market and even integrating prior experience from the field which should enable the department easily to take a broader approach to the systematic collection of information from the non-governmental market regarding their needs, and at the same time include graduates and alumni as sources of information (**compare finding 8**).

## Findings

None

## Conclusion:

The criterion on Information is fulfilled.

## Recommendations of the panel of experts

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The panel of experts recommends

- to accredit the Bachelor programme with conditions
- to accredit the Master programme with conditions

offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

## Findings

1. The process of continuous scoping the market needs as part of quality assurance should be broadened and strengthened (non-governmental employers) in order to be formal and systematic.
2. The bachelor programme has to strengthen its academic character with more emphasis on academic skills that should then also find its reflection as part of the final project.
3. The percentage of courses taught in English language should be increased.
4. In the bachelor programme teaching on social media, cross-media, and emerging media markets should be increased and transparently reflected in the course descriptions.
5. For all courses the intended learning outcomes have to be specific and therefore measurable. The distinction between outcomes and objectives has to be clear. Literature lists should be kept up to date.
6. The master thesis should be credited.

7. In the future development of the master programme, the needs of management positions in the mass communication labour market should also be considered.
8. There should be a systematic follow-up of graduates.
9. International mobility of staff should be further increased.
10. The ratio of students per capita/teaching staff should be improved by hiring additional teaching staff.
11. The workload connected to courses should be transparent. This should include contact as well as self-study time and will enable an easy transfer between the different credit systems.