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QUALITÄTSSICHERUNG DURCH
AKKREDITIERUNG VON
STUDIENGÄNGEN E.V.

FINAL REPORT

SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, MUSCAT, SULTANATE OF OMAN

CLUSTER GEOGRAPHY

GEOGRAPHY (BACHELOR)

GEOGRAPHY (MASTER)

March 2024



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DECISION OF THE AQAS STANDING COMMISSION ON THE STUDY PROGRAMMES

- “GEOGRAPHY” (BACHELOR)
- “GEOGRAPHY” (MASTER)

OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, MUSCAT, SULTANATE OF OMAN

Based on the report of the expert panel, the comments by the university and the discussions of the AQAS Standing Commission in its 20th meeting on 26 February 2024, the AQAS Standing Commission decides:

1. The study programmes “**Geography**” (**Bachelor**) and “**Geography**” (**Master**) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman** are accredited according to the AQAS Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Bachelor/Master).

The accreditations are 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 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**.

Conditions:

1. The course descriptions must be revised to present the anticipated qualifications described as Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) in a transparent way. All descriptions of the specific programme must be bundled in a kind of handbook and this document must be complete.
2. A policy on recognition must be provided by SQU.
3. To close the quality cycle and to foster the motivation of the students to participate in questionnaires, they have to be informed about the outcomes of the student surveys in an adequate manner.
4. SQU must outline a personnel development concept for the Department of Geography for the next five years, with the objective of supporting the staff.

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

1. It is recommended to create larger modules to increase the integration of methodological skills like field work and research methods.

2. It is recommended to strengthen the internationalization, i.e. by providing more options for international exchange for staff and students.
3. A description of the process how the course handbook is regularly updated according to current developments, including the references/academic literature to be read, should be handed in.
4. The workload of the teaching staff should be evaluated and adapted (if necessary).
5. It is recommended to involve representatives of the students in the QA system more directly in processes and meetings.
6. Recognizing the importance of theoretical foundations, also it is recommend to implement teaching methods combining scientific theory and practical application.
7. It is recommended to reduce the number of purely knowledge-based examinations and instead expanding other, more flexible forms of performance assessment (essays, short research reports, oral presentations, poster presentations, etc.).
8. It is recommended to all responsible people to also allow for multi-day excursions and field courses and to transparently anchor these in the curriculum.
9. SQU should develop a concept for strengthening the research activities at the Department of Geography further and how the central level supports it.

Recommendations for the Master's programme:

10. The workload and the expectations for the Master's thesis should be more transparent to prospective students.
11. A clearer profile of the Master's programme or at least more obvious specialization options should be developed to make it more attractive for international students.
12. It is recommended to continuously teach significant components in English in the future.
13. The introduction of an internship in the Master's programme is recommended.

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

EXPERTS' REPORT**ON THE STUDY PROGRAMMES**

- “GEOGRAPHY” (BACHELOR)
- “GEOGRAPHY” (MASTER)

OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, MUSCAT, SULTANATE OF OMAN

Visit to the university: 25 – 27 July 2023

Panel of experts:

Prof. Dr. Boris Braun

Human and Economic Geography, Department of Geography, University of Cologne, Germany

Prof. Dr. Volker Hochschild

Institute of Geography, University of Tübingen, Germany

Mr. Sujeet Shetty

Operations manager at ESRI Muscat, Oman (representative of the labour market)

Mr. Florens Förster

Student at RWTH Aachen, Germany (student expert)

Coordinator:

Doris Herrmann

AQAS, Cologne, Germany

Supported by

Kamilla Halemba

I. Preamble

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

AQAS is a full member of ENQA and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that our procedures comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), on which all Bologna countries agreed as a basis for internal and external quality assurance.

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

II. Accreditation procedure

This report results from the external review of the degree programmes "Geography" (BA/MA) offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman.

1. Criteria

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

2. Approach and methodology

Initialisation

The university mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in February 2022. The university produced a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). In May 2022, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation on the programmes and an appendix as well as statistical data on the programmes. Some additional information were handed in on request of the panel members after the site visit. The appendix included e.g.:

- Course syllabus
- Undergraduate Academic Regulations
- Short information on teaching staff
- Diploma Supplement
- Course Teaching Survey
- Information on labs and equipment
- MA Thesis Supervision

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility, and transparency. The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Standing Commission on 22.08.2022. The final version of the SER was handed in April 2023.

Nomination of the expert panel

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the respective discipline, the labour market, and students are involved. Furthermore, AQAS follows the principles for the selection of experts defined by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). The Standing Commission nominated the aforementioned expert panel in May 2023. AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and the university did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

Preparation of the site visit

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 to all panel members in order to increase transparency in the process and the upcoming discussions during the site visit.

Site visit

After a review of the SER, an online site visit to the university took place on 25–27 July 2023. During the online visit, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. the management of the higher education institution, the programme management, teaching and other staff, as well as students and graduates, in separate discussion rounds and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded by the presentation of the preliminary findings of the group of experts to the university's representatives.

Reporting

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

Decision

The report, together with the comments of the university, forms the basis for the AQAS Standing Commission to take a decision regarding the accreditation of the programmes. Based on these two documents, the AQAS Standing Commission took its decision on the accreditation on the basis of discussions in its meetings on 26 February 2024. 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 2024, AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel of experts.

III. General information on the university

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was founded in 1986. Since the College of Arts' founding in 1987, Geography has become a core subject, albeit it was formerly associated with the History Department. Following the College of Arts and Social Sciences' new building in 1993, Geography was shifted to the newly constituted College as a full-fledged academic department.

The University has developed a strategic plan (2016–2040) following Oman's National Education Strategy 2040. This plan lays the groundwork for the various units (Departments, Colleges, Deanships, Centers, and Administrative Departments) to create their strategic plans until 2040, focusing on five domains of undergraduate teaching and learning, postgraduate teaching and learning, research, creativity and innovation, and community engagement. The strategic goals of these domains are to facilitate and ensure the attainment of governance and management, financial capability, human resources, international collaboration, student experience, infrastructure and support services, and SQU medical and healthcare services. Each strategic discipline and aim strongly emphasizes continuous quality improvement through quality assurance, quality enhancement, and preparation for accreditation by a national or international agency or accreditation organization.

Five consecutive medium-term operational plans based on the long-term plans (2016 – 2040) have been prepared for all units to ensure the University's vision is accomplished. Four five-year plans will be produced following the initial operational plan for 2016–2020. The College of Arts and Social Sciences successfully implemented the first operational plan (2016-2020), and the second operational plan for 2021-2025 was launched. The Department of Geography has developed a five-year operating plan to revise and amend the Bachelor's programme, redevelop a Master's degree and establish a PhD programme. The Department seeks to accomplish its goals through its mission to be a centre of excellence in teaching, research, and training in geography at the local, regional and international levels and a vision to provide high-quality learning, research and training in the geographical field that promotes and challenge individual growth among students.

The Department also provides a vibrant learning/research environment and the research instruments necessary for teaching and research in all major branches of the topic, both independently and in conjunction with colleagues from other University Departments in critical disciplines like geomorphology, and climatology, environmental studies, population studies, and settlements. Three hundred fifty-two students were admitted to the Department of Geography over the last five years (2017-2021), with an average cohort size of 70 students per year. Female students account for the majority of annual enrolled students, accounting for an average of 73% over the last five years.

IV. Assessment of the study programmes

1. Quality of the curriculum

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

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

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

[ESG 1.2]

Description

As stated in the SER, the **Bachelor programme** in Geography was created to expose students to various academic and professional opportunities. The curriculum prepares students for careers in Applied Geography and Urban Planning. Undergraduate students in the Department of Geography may specialize in one of four areas: (i) Urban and Regional Planning, (ii) Environmental Studies, (iii) Geographic Information Systems, or (iv) Population Studies. To graduate with a BA in Geography, students must complete 120 credit hours. Requirements for completing a Bachelor's of Geography: University foundation programme (0 credit), University requirements (6 credits), University electives (6 credits), College requirements (11 credits), College electives (3 credits), Departmental requirements (0 credit), Departmental electives (0 credit), major requirements (52 credits), major electives (9 credits), specialization requirements (30 credits), specialization electives (3 credits), minor requirements (0 credit), and minor electives (0 credit).

The College of Arts and Social Sciences students must complete modules for the general education requirements of SQU: undergraduate students must fulfil the foundation programme prerequisites (basic mathematics, advanced mathematics for social sciences, intensive English, and information technology) before enrolling in their selected degree programme. They may earn a Bachelor's degree with a major, a minor, or a Bachelor's degree with a specialization. The University's cultural orientation, social engagement, and moral development objectives are to be met through three required courses (Arabic language, Oman and Islamic civilisation, and Oman: state and people), and three elective courses are chosen from a suite of two-credit courses covering a variety of disciplines. The University offers elective courses in various subjects, including creative writing, innovation and entrepreneurship, research methodology, and ethics. As stated in the SER, the Bachelor's programmes' core and elective courses and a necessary final year project contribute to achieving critical thinking, problem-solving, lifelong learning, and creativity objectives.

The educational objectives of the BA programme in Geography are mapped to the student learning outcomes (ILOs) as described in the SER: (i) Graduates will learn fundamental concepts in physical geography, human geography, regional planning and human-environment interactions in an interdisciplinary context while developing technical proficiency to produce graduates who know and understand the interrelationships between fundamental concepts and skills in the major domains of geography. (ii) Graduates will learn to describe, analyze, and explain the patterns, processes, and interactions of human and physical phenomena on Earth's surface to produce graduates who can apply their geographic knowledge and practical skills to help them manage issues concerning people, places, and environments. (iii) Graduates will practice their knowledge through training and fieldwork to produce graduates who understand and can apply descriptive and analytical knowledge about map reading, statistics, and geospatial technologies to the continuous changing interaction of people in their physical and human environments from local to global scales. (iv) Graduates will learn to use creative thinking, problem-solving, communication, innovation, collaboration and critical thinking skills.

According to the SER and in response to the AQAS's first cycle of institutional accreditation recommendations, the Department of Geography has spent the previous five years continually enhancing its quality assurance approach through most noteworthy achievements in:

- Teaching and learning: (i) Research Methods in Geography (GEOG: 3650) was moved from the sixth semester to the third semester on the recommendation of the AQAS panel of experts during the first accreditation cycle so that students could become more familiar with the approach used to gather geographic data through field observations, maps, photographs, satellite imagery and censuses at an earlier stage of their degree plan in Geography. (ii) Qualitative approaches were emphasized in Human Geography primarily by teaching the students methods to collect human behavior and perception data, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and oral history.

- **Research:** (i) Elaboration of the Department's Research clusters in the following areas: Climate change, environmental change, geospatial big data analytics, population, planning and governance, and remote sensing and spatial modelling. (ii) Over the last five years, research outputs have increased significantly in the number of articles published in highly ranked journals and funded research programmes. The Department of Geography's academic staff publishes 40 journal articles each year, which equates to an average of 2.5 publications per academic staff member.

Master's Programme:

The courses to be selected depend in the Master's programme depend to a great extent on the specialization chosen by the student. Usually, the Master's is not studied consecutive to the BA programme but chosen by students who are already working in a specific area for some years. Therefore, the students have already a specific qualification profile and follow their own interests.

The current structure of the MA programme offered by SQU is as follows:

#	Courses	Credit Hours	Language
1	Advanced quantitative and qualitative research methods	3	English
2	Special Topics in Physical Geography	3	Arabic
3	Special Topics in Human Geography	3	Arabic
4	Geographical thought	3	Arabic
5	Advanced GIS	3	English
6	Advanced remote sensing	3	English
7	Elective 1	3	Arabic
9	Elective 2	3	Arabic
9	Thesis	6	Arabic
	Total	30	

Together with the SER, the Department of Geography handed in course descriptions for the core courses listed above. During the site visit it became clear that SQU is in the process to conceptualize a new curriculum for the Master's programme which should be offered in Arabic language. The core courses are: Philosophical Foundations of Sustainable Development, Sustainable Strategies, Value Chains of Sustainable Development, Spatial Sustainability, Leading Change for Sustainability, Research Methodologies & Data Base Decision Making for Sustainability. The approval of the Department Board is scheduled for October 2023, followed by approvals by the College Board in December 2023, the SQU Council in 2024 and the start of the new programme in Fall 2024. Due to the fact that the new programme was not approved by the Boards and Councils, SQU and AQAS agreed that the running MA programme has to be assessed by the panel of experts in this review process. The new programme can only be assessed in a later stage. However, the panel members also discussed the way ahead with the faculty members during the site visit.

Experts' evaluation

1.1 Bachelor Programme of Geography

The overall impression of the Bachelor's programme is very good, the concept is straightforward. The four specializations with a focus on GIS are highly approved by the students. The education is labour market

oriented, the representatives the panel of experts met were happy with the graduates. According to the labour market the graduates are well informed with a lot of skills.

The rigid university wide rules of SQU prevent the flexibilization of the module's credits, nevertheless it is recommended by the panel of experts to create larger modules to increase the integration of methodological skills like field work and research methods **[Finding 1]**. The general study plan comprises of 52 credits major (Geography) requirements and 30 credits specialization requirements according to the four specializations "Environmental Studies", "Geography Information System", "Population Studies" and "Urban and Regional Planning", adding up to 120 credits including university and college requirements. It enables the students to learn the basics of Geography and having a job oriented specialization corresponding to their requests.

Actually, 60 to 70 students select a Geography Bachelor's programme each year, where they specialize after the first semester according to their desires and their grades within the introductory courses. In general, the studies take 8 semesters (4 years) and are finalized with a graduation project of 6 credits. The students are continuously assessed, they have at least three examinations per module, although they have different competence-oriented assessment tools, where a single examination counts maximum 60 %. The course descriptions must be improved and completed, presenting the anticipated qualifications described as Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) in a transparent way. The process must be described on how they are regularly updated according to current developments, including the references/academic literature to be read **[Finding 2]**.

SQU has an internal quality assurance system in which student surveys take place at the end of the semester. The teaching staff is evaluated as well as the content, the learning materials and other aspects of teaching and learning. The students are not informed about the outcome but in the discussion with the student representatives they confirmed that they can see the action which is taken by the department (see below).

The panel of experts is aware that the Undergraduate Academic Regulations (6th version 2019) also address the option of recognition of achievements at other universities or for incoming students but they did not manage to get information on how the process of recognition gained by students at other universities (or in the labour market) works at SQU and which criteria are applied. Therefore, a policy on recognition must be handed in **[Finding 3]**.

Although, Geography has a strong international element as a discipline, there are not many outgoing and almost no incoming students at the Department. The panel of experts recommends that the internationalization should be fostered and strengthen, i.e. by providing more options for international exchange for staff and students **[Finding 4]**. It adds lots of skills although it takes some effort to keep the international exchange running. The department has several international cooperations, the existing ones should be deepened, and new ones should be activated.

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

a. Master Programme of Geography

The Master's programme offered at the College of Arts and Social Sciences of SQU is transparent regarding the qualifications to be achieved, and the learning outcomes are clearly documented. In general, the curricular structure of the programme supports the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and the learner's progression. The curricular elements (courses = modules) are well documented including their functions, and their compulsory or elective character. The panel of experts could not find a typical study plan in the documents provided, but due to the strong individualization of the Master's programme, this could also be difficult to

implement. The highly individualized supervision of the Master's students, which takes place in the Geography department of the SQU, could also make typical study plan less important. Nevertheless, the course descriptions should not be offered as individual documents, but they should be bundled into a module handbook covering the entire study programme **[Finding 5]**.

The intended learning outcomes reflect well the requirements especially of the national labour market (importance of modern methods and GIS/RS applications) and also general academic-scientific requirements are well met. The Department of Geography is in regular contact with stakeholders outside the university and potential employers, systematically taking-up their feedback. The department has meetings with representatives of the private and the public labour market and has also committees for regular exchange. Supervision (for external examination) and internships are also discussed during these meetings.

The programme is well structured but nevertheless characterized by a high degree of flexibility in the individual design of studies. The very small number of students, which has continued to decrease in recent years, makes very individual support possible. The resulting potential for a very targeted support of the students is obviously used positively by the lecturers and implemented constructively. This is particularly evident in the fact that advice on finding a topic and support for the final Master's project begins at a very early stage. The list of topics of the currently running (3), but also of the already completed Master's theses (11) since 2017 shows that in the final Master's projects challenging and current topics with a clear reference to the urgent questions in Oman are researched. Moreover, a wide spectrum of state-of-the-art methods is covered. This would not be possible without dedicated support from a committed and qualified teaching staff. Overall, the Master's thesis project is more important within the study and qualification programme than the 6 credits (out of a total of 30) indicate. In line with the national credit system the credits only reflect contact hours, but do not provide any assessment of the work time that students are expected to spend on the Master's thesis. The panel of experts understands that credits at SQU do not directly reflect workload for students, but this is where this system seems particularly problematic. At the very least, ways should be found to make the expectations for the Master's thesis more transparent to prospective students **[Finding 6]**.

Looking at the provided documentation it is hard to identify a clear (academic) profile of the Masters' programme. However, a pronounced focus on methods (mainly GIS and remote sensing, but also social science methods) is evident. Another feature of the programme is that students must take courses in both Human and Physical Geography. Some specialization in one of the two main branches of Geography – as usually allowed or even enforced by Master's programmes at other universities – is only possible via two elective courses, which together comprise 6 credits. According to the teaching staff, the main specialization is reflected in the topic of the Master's thesis. However, it should be considered whether students should not be given more opportunities to specialize, especially since corresponding specializations are already possible in the Bachelor's programme. A clearer profile of the programme or at least more obvious specialization options should be developed to make the programme more attractive for international students **[Finding 7]**.

Both students and Omani employers rate the Master's programme positively. While with the low number of students' the intended achievements can be reached by means of intensive individualization, the panel of experts assumes that the current approach will not be able to succeed with the intended growing number of students (see above).

In this context, the expert panel also noted that the high degree of individualization and the small number of students in the courses put a great strain on the staff's teaching load. This time could be lacking in teaching in the Bachelor's programme and could be at the expense of research activities. Therefore, the workload of the teaching staff should be evaluated and adapted (if necessary) **[Finding 8]**.

In the discussion during the site visit, it became clear that the Master's programme is not so much intended to lead to a scientific education that will be continued in a PhD programme, but rather is seen as further training

for higher-level managers – mostly in the domestic public sector. The majority of students do not immediately follow the Bachelor's programme, but study the Masters' programme only after several years of professional activity, often financed by their employers or scholarships. This may be clear to applicants from Oman, but it might hinder internationalization. While the programme meets the requirements of the Master level, it is not fully transparent to outsiders what the qualification of the graduate of the programme might be. At the very least, this very specific character of the Master's programme should be better communicated to the outside world (see Finding 7).

Considering the details of the curriculum in particular the syllabi of the main courses Special Topics on Physical Geography (GEOG6112), Special Topics on Human Geography (GEOG6113), Advanced Geographical Information Systems (GEOG 6121), and Advanced Remote Sensing (GEOG6122) are well structured and the course descriptions, the aims, the objectives, and the lecture schedule are well and clearly described.

The descriptions of the course Advanced Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods (GEOG6111) is rather fragmentary and must be revised (see Finding 2). Based on the available documentation about the course Geographical Thought (GEOG 6114) and considering the course description, objectives and lecture schedule, the course seems like an introductory course dealing with the general history and philosophy of geographical sciences. It remains unclear to the panel of experts why it is one of the core courses of the Master's programme, as it does not serve or endorse the main goals and visions of it. Judging on the documented contents it looks more like an introductory course and could also be placed in a Bachelor's programme. The panel of experts misses the course descriptions for the elective courses (GEOG6131 through 6138) in the records, and also seems nearly impossible to maintain these offerings in their entirety given the very low student numbers in the programme. The course descriptions must be completed and revised.

In all the course descriptions, it is noticeable that the literature provided is often rather old. Therefore, the panel of experts requests a revision of the academic literature in the references. Of course, some older basic works can remain in the lists, but they must be supplemented by newer literature (see Finding 2).

The panel of experts fully supports the significant role of English language and media in the current Master's programme. Since the high requirements for English language skills for admission to the Master's programme (also in comparison to other disciplines) were identified by the Department of Geography as the main reason for the low number of students in the Master's programme, the programme is to be switched completely to Arabic as the language of instruction in the future (in addition to an understandable profiling in the field of sustainability). The expert panel is sceptical about this because, on the one hand, it will make the desirable internationalization even more difficult and, on the other hand, many media and literature will only be accessible in English. It is therefore urgently recommended that significant English-language components continue to be taught in the Master's programme in the future **[Finding 9]**.

Discussions with graduates and also current students support the expert's initial impression that the introduction of an internship in the Master's programme is recommendable **[Finding 10]**. While clearly the function of an internship in a Master's programme is different from the one in a Bachelor's programme, it will even be beneficial for students who already work as they can see different sectors and discover new synergies for implementation. A great chance lies even with combining it with student's research topics and then developing it into the thesis creating and added value that is close to application.

Recognizing the high level of expertise of the teaching staff that has the full capacity and competences to support the Master's programme, unused potential could be utilized by further strengthening scientific cooperation with other Departments and Research Centers of SQU to increase interdisciplinary research. Although several collaborations already exist, the expert panel encourages geography staff to expand them further - within SQU, but also with universities abroad (see Finding 4). This could be of great advantage, especially for Master's students.

The expert panel concludes that the basic requirements for a Master's degree programme are met, even if these do not (cannot) correspond in detail to the specifications of the European Qualifications Framework in all points under the given circumstances of the education and university system in Oman (e.g. credit point system differs).

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

2. Procedures for quality assurance

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

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

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

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

[ESG 1.1, 1.7 & 1.9]

Description

Sultan Qaboos University has a specialized quality assurance office to improve academic, administrative, financial, and technical performance and promote the University's quality culture. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) was founded in October 2011 by the College of Arts and Social Sciences. In 2018, QAAC was promoted to a permanent unit with more significant resources to respond efficiently to fast-growing quality assurance initiatives and became an integral part of the Dean's office. It is headed by an academic with the assistance of a full-time quality assurance officer. Additionally, the head of the unit engages with departmental quality assurance representatives, technical and administrative employees, and students to accomplish the unit's objectives.

According to the SER, the Department of Geography has a quality assurance committee monitoring and revising the quality assurance systems according to the college. University standards through procedures on (i) twenty-five Department routine activities that are carried out on a regular schedule to ensure the effectiveness of departmental processes and compliance with quality standards for continuous ongoing practice as needed based on SQU regulations and the Department needs, as well as, community service, research and consultancy, steering activity, and teaching and learning; activities such as staff CVs, students' liaison committee meeting, strategic plan tasks progress review, members training needs, book update and review, schedule and teaching load sheet, teaching survey report, midterm and final exams need assessment, student academic advising status report, etc. The 25 activities are documented in SER under periodic departmental tasks. (ii) Plan domains' key performance indicators and benchmarks that are used to monitor better and manage the various previous activities such as the number of students' extracurricular activities done per year, percentage of course sections with 30 or fewer students, percentage of courses assessed and evaluated, percentage of student graduated within an expected period of graduation of a concerned cohort, number of stakeholders' advisory board meetings per year, etc. (iii) Quality monitoring tools that demonstrate effectiveness and relevance of quality of teaching, research community steering, and service activities with association to the plan's



primary domains: Department committees, College committees, course files and courses audit, appraisal of academic staff, Department annual report, stakeholders' advisory board, external Ad-hoc committees, and quality assurance action plan.

In 2016, the University developed a set of graduate qualities and a strategy for new undergraduate academic programmes as part of its ongoing upgrading efforts. It contains a technique for matching the rates with undergraduate programme objectives and results mapped with learning outcomes. Student assessments and input from graduates and employers determine the qualities' attainment. The new policy for undergraduate academic programmes requires information on teaching strategies, programme evaluation, review techniques, anticipated employment destinations, programme objectives, learning outcomes, content, learning resources, letters of support from local stakeholders, and international benchmarking.

The University council is ultimately responsible for approving undergraduate programmes. Upon approval and before programme implementation, each cohort receives a degree and work plan. The degree plan details the mandatory and elective courses, credits, and other graduation criteria. The work plan divides the degree requirements across semesters to help students enrolled in regular enrollment finish the programme in the time allocated.

The University announced a new policy on academic programme amendments in 2018. Accredited academic programmes may be revised as a result of this new legislation. Further adjustments shall only take effect after they have been approved by the proper authorities and apply solely to newly admitted cohorts. Amendment procedures begin at least six months before new cohort admissions to verify that new degree plans comply with the course descriptions and credit hour distribution established in the new degree plans. The University council confirmed the *Sultan Qaboos University Academic Program Review Policy* which was recently amended to provide a systematic and consistent approach to reviewing University academic programmes. The review allows the Department to evaluate its goals and operations to improve the programmes. The College of Arts and Social Sciences has a policy requiring each academic programme to conduct a self-study report. The report shows systematic reviews of the curriculum, instruction, and support services to ensure students attain the targeted learning outcomes.

Experts' evaluation

There is a very comprehensive system of quality assurance within the university on the central level. Moreover, the panel of experts appreciate that there is a transparent quality management system implemented in Department of Geography, comprehensive monitoring takes place within the study programmes and the interaction is recognisable. In addition to the Central Quality Management, quality management units were also created in 2017 at the respective Colleges in order to improve their study programmes in their own responsibility. The review of evaluations as well as the grading system and graduation rates is common practice. In the past, monitoring measures and reviews were derived from the findings in order to improve the situation of students in the study programmes. Although student workload seems to be at a reasonable level, it is not evaluated and therefore no concrete data can be provided by the department. On the basis of the student survey, the panel of experts got the impression that the workload does not extend a reasonable limit and is not an excessive burden.

The tasks, responsibilities and objectives are clearly defined within the quality management system and all responsible persons are involved in the quality management process and participate in the quality assurance process. The extent of monitoring and the measures that are in place and used are appropriate.

The quality management system has proven, through the adjustments in the curriculum in recent years, that possible problems and difficulties are identified, and these are solved together; through stringent planning in quality management and cooperation with those responsible for the study programme, these tasks are solved

jointly. In the past, difficulties in courses (relatively high non-passing rates) were identified and adjustments in the curriculum were made. Some students had difficulties in their studies due to the English language skills required for the degree programmes but this was also countered by the provision of additional courses.

The panel of experts appreciates the already existing cooperation of the Department of Geography with external parties (alumni, representatives of the labour market and government/ministries): through regular surveys and evaluations, but also through exchanges, also informally (through many personal contacts (also from former students)), the externals are integrated into the quality management system. Through this involvement of externals, the curriculum is continuously developed and adapted to the needs in Oman and the labour market.

During the online site visit the panel of experts had the chance to watch some videos about SQU and the Department of Geography and its network. This digital tour and the exchange with the labour market in the discussion rounds showed very clearly how well connected the university is with the stakeholders in Oman. The panel got the impression that regular exchanges take place and synergies are used. Even after graduation, the students are in an exchange with the university. The areas in which the alumni of the BA programme are employed are analysed by SQU, but also whether and how they continued their studies. When assessing the transition rates between the BA and the MA programme it has to be kept in mind that the educational system in Oman differs from the German one because the majority of students in the Master's degree has already some years of experiences in their jobs and therefore a specific qualification profile which combines professional and academic experiences.

The learning outcomes are discussed via many different formats (meetings within the department, subject conferences and exchanges with quality management) and are continuously developed with and by the teaching staff. The teachers are in constant exchange with the quality management and receive the results of the student surveys in regular sections. An exchange with the students takes place and feedback (improvements or adjustments) is noticeably accepted by the staff, which is perceived as a positive exchange by both the students and the teaching staff. However, the system does not establish a step in which the students are informed about the results of the surveys. To close the quality cycle and to foster the motivation of the students to participate in such questionnaires, they have to be informed about the outcomes of the surveys in an adequate manner, with the goal to encourage the growth of the feedback culture at SQU **[Finding 11]**. The panel of experts approve that the internal QA system is very well developed and good decisions are made as a result, but the meetings in which the outcomes and measures are discussed seem to be exclusive for staff members. Therefore, the panel of experts recommends that the QA system involves representatives of the students more directly in the process and meetings **[Finding 12]**.

During the site visit the panel of experts discussed how academic integrity is ensured by SQU. The teaching staff explained that the professor work on high academic standard and also teach this to the students when they prepare papers or their final theses. A separate policy as a "code of good academic conduct" does not seem to exist at the university, or it is not recognisable to the reviewers. Due to the fact that all professors are exceptionally strong in research and publish a great deal (also internationally), the panel of experts accept that this topic is taught implicitly when professor and students exchange.

For the experts' panel, it is very easy to see how the programme is linked to the university's quality management and how it cooperates with it. Positive changes and adjustments are also recognizable. The experts are very satisfied with the system and are also very confident that this system will work well in the future. The processes and responsibilities are known and established, cooperation is given, and all status groups (students, lecturers and externals) are either involved or participate in the quality management system. The processes are lived by all participants and applied very well. It can be emphasized, that the good work and motivation of the university to ensure good quality management is obvious. It is very easy to see how everyone is working together to ensure that the very good system is also applied by everyone at the university.

The panel would like to highlight only some minor aspects which would make the already good system even better: 1) The evaluation and monitoring of the workload of the student (also in relation to the planned time in the curriculum) should be evaluated and the results should be monitored. The feedback from the students on how much time they spend on the modules within their studies is of value for this kind of evaluation. 2) The results of the student survey should also be discussed with the students so that they get an idea what feedback is given in the courses and what measures are taken by the Department to deal with suggestions for improvement. Students should also be included in activities on possible adjustments in their programme to encourage participation.

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

3. Learning, teaching and assessment of students

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

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

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

[ESG 1.3]

Description

As explained in the SER, the College of Arts and Social Sciences uses a range of learning technologies to enhance their learning methods. Moodle is used by the faculty and provides an efficient interactive e-learning platform. The learning objectives reported in the SER are achieved through fieldwork, maps, information and communication technology, use of resources, and simulation in Geography.

During the first lecture at the beginning of a semester, staff members distribute the course syllabus to the students. The syllabus includes a short course description, objectives, outputs, topics, teaching methods, evaluation mechanisms, references, e.g., books, journal papers, websites etc.

The staff member explains this plan's evaluation mechanism and grading distribution method. Most of the time, student performance in the courses is evaluated using three components: the midterm exam (20 to 25%), final exam (50-60%), class work, e.g., research conducted by the student, or a presentation on a specific topic (20-25%). The evaluation tools can be increased in some courses to four or five components, depending on the nature of the system and the teacher's philosophy. The evaluation performance tools increase whenever the grades distribution and rates reflect the right level for students without causing grade inflation.

The academic advising process is responsible for implementing the study plan for a Bachelor's in Geography. The student and academic advisor are primarily responsible for following the study plan. Many students enrol in courses without getting advice from their academic advisor. Some of them can successfully pursue the programme, but some struggle in the process, which confuses the student's plan and may force the student to stay an additional semester or maybe even longer.

Experts' evaluation

During the site visit at SQU the expert panel held different talks with teachers and students as well as employees and graduates of B.A. and M.A. of Geography to receive an impression on the learning conditions and

quality of teaching. The expert panel is convinced that the quality of both teaching and learning conditions clearly meet the requirements of higher education. Especially the variety of used learning methods during the whole study time, e.g. group learning, small research projects, field work or/and software-based applications, fulfil the expectations concerning the diversity of students' learning behaviour. Furthermore, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), the Centre for Educational Technology (CET), the Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD), and the Centre for Information Systems (CIS) assist the teaching staff to further improve didactic and technological skills. Employers confirm that graduates are equipped with soft skills required by the labour market and express their general satisfaction with the quality of the study programmes. The portfolio of courses is supported with online learning elements offering self-trainings or quizzes suitable to specific courses.

Concerning the teaching methods and the intended learning outcomes of the study programmes, the experts still see a high emphasis on memorized learning. Also, students confirmed a solid amount of "theoretical" teaching during the courses and would like to see a better link between conceptual-theoretical content and practical applications. Recognizing the importance of theoretical foundations, the experts also recommend to implement teaching methods combining scientific theory and practical application **[Finding 13]**.

Overall, a lot of energy seems to go into exams for both faculty and students. Courses are usually completed with assignments, one mid-term and on final exam. In general, the applied assessment methods correspond with the Intended Learning Outcomes of the courses. However, it is recommended to reduce the number of purely knowledge-based examinations and instead expanding other, more flexible forms of performance assessment (essays, short research reports, oral presentations, poster presentations, etc.) **[Finding 14]**. This said, the expert panel also recognizes the limitations for more flexible formats of performance assessment that the Department of Geography faces. SQU has a common policy on assessments and grading on university level, so there is relatively little scope for individual regulations at the department level. The variety of examination methods is regulated by the SQU's policies.

With regard to the teaching formats, the panel of experts would like to note that especially in Geography, field access and field courses play a central role didactically as well as and conceptually. Under the existing regulations of the SQU, field courses and excursions seem to be difficult to implement. The Department of Geography tries to compensate this deficit with additional one-day excursions on weekends. However, the panel recommends to all responsible persons to also allow for multi-day excursions and field courses and to transparently anchor these in the curriculum **[Finding 15]**.

Considering the student feedback in the interviews the panel of expert confirms a high level of transparency concerning assessment regulations and procedures, which are available online. Students know the organizational structure as well as responsibilities in case of complaints about grading or other conditions of examination. The details of courses (intended learning outcomes, regulations on assessment and attendance, etc.) are available online respectively in the course files. Nevertheless, it would be desirable if the course descriptions were not only available as individual (PDF) documents, but could be bundled into a module handbook covering the entire study programme (see above).

On a very positive note the experts recognize the evaluation of courses at the end of the semester and the follow-up process with clearly organized responsibilities on Department and college level. The panel of experts was not able to see the concrete results of the teaching evaluation, but the survey instruments make a good impression. Questions on didactics, assessments and course organization combined with open questions are appropriate to assure the quality of courses. Students and graduates confirm that the Department of Geography adopts adequate measures to resolve evaluated problems in the study programs. Overall, there seems to be a very close and trusting exchange between students and teaching staff, which is also reflected in the continuous improvement of teaching and also takes into account the special needs of individual students.

Consistently high student success rates support existing regulations and practices. Moreover, regulations concerning the compensation of disadvantages for examinations are made public on the internet and assistance is given to the students according to their individual needs.

Documented, accessible and appropriate regulations to compensate for possible disadvantages, illness or absence in exams are in place. The same seems to be true for procedures for student appeals at the Department, the College, and the University level.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

[ESG 1.4]

Description

As stated in the SER, for the cohort 2011 and before, the admission into the Department of Geography was according to the internal distribution of students in the university and in the College or Arts and Social Sciences. Students enroll in the College and study four introductory courses in the first semester. Admission into the Departments, including Geography, is at the beginning of the second semester, based on the following criteria: 1. students' interest, 2. availability of seats for each Department, and 3. getting a grade of (B) and above in the course "Introduction to Geography". At that time, the Bachelor of Geography programme accepted between 70 to 90 students annually. The study plan was changed in 2012, and it became bilingual; admission to the programme is according to the following criteria: students' interest, availability of seats for each Department, and getting (Level 6) in the placement test of the English language, which is administrated by the Language Center at SQU. The students who have not achieved the required level (Level 6) in English must study intensive courses in 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 Geography. Students can only begin enrolling in courses in the Geography programme upon completing the foundation programme. Students accepted into the Department of Geography will be admitted after completing the above English courses.

The number of students enrolled in the Department of Geography decreased since the implementation of the bilingual study plan in 2012, so the department currently accepts between 55 to 68 students annually. The student and the academic advisor monitor the student's enrollment in the prerequisite courses. Most of the students followed their study plan and enrolled in the prerequisite courses as set out in the programme. In some cases, the Department was forced to accept the student's registration in two methods in one semester, even though one was a pre-requisite to the other. This solved the problem where the student needed an exception to complete his study on time.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences implemented a new regulation for the substitution of courses a year ago, namely, that the student must get all approvals for substituting a period before the student begins the study of the alternative method. The general conditions for the substitution process are documented in the SER. In all cases, the substitution process does not occur without the approval of the academic advisor, head of the department, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies, and the admission and registration deanship.

For graduation, students: (i) must study all courses listed in the study plan with success, (ii) must complete the curriculum requirements of their degree programme with minimum graduation and major average of 2.00, and (iii) have fulfilled any additional requirements specified by the degree plan, e.g. summer training without credit hours.

Experts' evaluation

The University admission process is well documented and is made available to the students on the website. The minimum qualification required for the course is also conveyed through the website. The University also has an open camp once a year open for the public which provides information to prospective students. Once the student is admitted to the university, there are two orientation seminars for the students: one is offered by the university for all the students and another one is offered by the College of Arts and Social Sciences for the students opting for this specific college. Overall, there is no doubt from the panel's side that the admission process is organized efficiently, which is supported by the positive feedback of Department staff and students. The QA system provides additional quantitative data on the admission process which are available to the University for monitoring the procedure continuously.

The Bachelor programme is held bilingual in Arabic and English language, and consequently minimum English language skills on level 6 are required for admission. The University admits students into the College of Arts and Social Sciences and the students undergo a one year foundation programme which includes Math, English and IT. After the foundational year the students are interviewed and they are provided an admission into Geography based on their choice and their performance in the foundation course exams.

The study plans of the BA programme are made available on the College website and course descriptions can be accessed through the SQU Portal by searching by the course code. The experts feel that the current documentation of the courses is not very user friendly and recommend that the study plans should be merged in one document which has the course description as well as the credit information for easier access to the students (see above).

It is assessed positively how students are guided through the first year and also that academic advisors who give advice and support in all academic and social affairs are available on Department level. The advisors support the students with the selection of courses and help on individual questions about learning and examination techniques. The expert panel appreciates the system of student consultancy by academic advisors and would like to highlight that the students during the discussion round with the panel emphasized the important role of their advisors for a successful study process. The panel of experts commend SQU, CASS and the Department of Geography for its student's support.

During the online site visit the University management informed the panel of experts that it is working towards developing exchange programmes with universities in other countries to foster student mobility. This option of student exchange should also be available to the students of the Department of Geography in the future. Up-till-now only a few student took to chance to go abroad, although regulations are in place that allow and support international mobility of students (incoming and outgoing). This aspect was already mentioned in the first accreditation procedure carried out in 2017. Respecting that it is important to maintain its own identity and also embedding it in the regional cultural context, the exchange of ideas and exposure to different contexts are a vital part of the academic advancement. Considering that yet there are no outgoing students, it is necessary to take further steps to enhance the possibilities for students to study abroad. The Department and potentially CASS should work with the University to enter partnerships with institutions abroad and encourage student mobility (see Finding 4).

The university issues an transcript as Diploma Supplement which provides transparent information on the qualification gained, the courses that the student has taken and the grade that the student has earned in each

semester throughout the study. This transcript should facilitate the students to pursue further academic career in foreign countries.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

5. Teaching staff

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

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

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

[ESG 1.5]

Description

The Department of Geography's academic staff consists of one full professor, five associate professors, nine assistant professors, and two lecturers. Two lab technicians, a field supervisor, and administrative coordinators constitute the supporting staff of the Department. The University has two distinct policies for hiring academic faculty: (i) for permanent Omani academic staff to enhance the number of national staff and allow the employment of eligible Omani graduates from any University subject to certain conditions and qualifications. (ii) for international academic staff through advertisements on the SQU website and applications routed directly to the College or Personnel Department. Yearly the Department recruitment committee chaired by the Head of the Department identifies staff needs (Academic, permanent, visiting and administrative) and prepares a list of the required grades with a robust justification. The College recruitment committee, chaired by the Dean of the College, discusses, adjusts and approves the Department proposal. The University recruitment committee, chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor of College for academic affairs and community services, discuss and approve the College proposal.

As stated in the SER, the University offers numerous possibilities for faculty professional development to enhance faculty abilities through the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the Centre for Educational Technology, the Centre for Human Resources Development, and the Centre for Information Systems. The centres support teaching with media equipment, provide e-learning services, and offer frequent workshops, seminars, and consultations on instructional design, effective use of educational media and telecommunications, as well as professional development courses. The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has appointed fellows competent in contemporary teaching methodologies as focal points within their respective Colleges. At the same time, the Center for Preparatory Studies coordinates the Centre's operations with its units.

The University has three ways to evaluate the academic staff performance: an academic staff appraisal system, annual awards, and academic promotion. Academic staff disciplinary procedures are designed at the University to provide a structured, transparent, and equitable time-based process. There are guidelines to ensure that academic staff are made aware of the reasons for disciplinary actions, interventions, and corrective strategies followed and the expected outcome of the disciplinary process regarding misconduct and serious misconduct.

Experts' evaluation

The department staff is motivated, competent, and well organised. They are managing the workload properly, they have a good motivation in teaching and student support. The students have good relationship to their teachers, they found them always helpful. The staff is finding also ways to overcome structural regulations which limit some necessary elements of learning (i.e. excursions). The panel of experts acknowledges that there are also financial restrictions for a full professorship in Geography at SQU but having such an additional positions for full professors would also enhance the situation of the ambitious but limited Department through new research fields and new specialisations.

The department teaching staff (15 members) is fitting the student requirements, they are adequately qualified and will be available for the coming six years. There is an Instruction Center at the university for the staff development, where the Geography Department has regularly seats for the online courses learning tools. The general teaching load is 12 credits plus supervision and applies to every one of the teaching staff. The female percentage of the staff is around 20 %, similar to European portions, although they do not have a women's advancement. Nevertheless, there seems to be a hierarchical gap between the associate professors and the students, since there is no PhD programme so far, it will be introduced in the year 2025.

The panel of experts comes to the conclusion that the staff needs more time for research. The acquisition of research grants is fine but could also be enhanced. Although they are publishing in internationally high ranked journals, the overall scientific visibility should be increased. SQU should hand in a concept for strengthening the research activities at the Department of Geography and how the central level supports it **[Finding 16]**. Their collaboration contacts are good, they are provided with travel grants to have once a year a symposium visit abroad for 10 days.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

6. Learning resources and student support

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

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

[ESG 1.6]

Description

According to the SER, SQU promotes an active learning environment through the following resources: (i) Physical space: the University has comfortable classrooms equipped with projectors and sound equipment. The laboratories have cutting-edge technology and software to build students' creative talents. SQU's main library, Oman's most extensive, and the College's particular library offer a wide range of materials and services. The College of Arts and Social Science also operates its bookstore, which stocks textbooks for most courses. A special needs lab with all the necessary facilities and equipment was set up at the College in 2009. The College renovated the main building in 2019 with a track system designed for visually impaired students to guarantee classroom access. (ii) Virtual space through email accounts, wireless internet access, and an e-learning platform. (iii) Social space through student services, sports infrastructure, coffee shops, and catering. (iv) Psychological space through Student Counselling Centre established in 1999 to provide counselling, academic, educational, psychological, social, and cultural services. (v) Computing Resources of the Department

of Geography, which has two well-equipped labs for Remote sensing and GIS. Each lab has 22 desktops, and two technicians supervise the labs.

The University 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, Student Counselling Centre, and Independent Learning Centre.

Experts' evaluation

The two study programmes are well equipped: there are up-to-date computers with campus licenses of ESRI and ENVI and further opensource software. According to a MoU with a company they also have three Unmanned Aerial Systems available. This applies also to the field equipment with total station, compasses and a field spec for remote sensing field validation. As the staff has a tremendously high workload with the field studies, they provide 8 to 10 one day excursions so far. Apart from that, there is an e-learning platform available which is used also with lectures in presence.

The students get a good insight into what the contents are within the programmes. The planned learning objectives, the forms of learning used, how and in what framework the examinations take place and what the intended workload is are communicated clearly and transparently in advance. On the website of the degree programmes, the aspects mentioned are all described accordingly in the (digital) course book and regularly adjusted, approximately every year. The information provided shows that the planning of the study programmes is stringent, and a coherent planning is recognisable.

Within the planning of the two study programmes, good cooperation between the responsible persons is evident. There is good cooperation both within the curriculum and in the implementation of the study programme, and no overlaps in teaching were observed. Through a variety of committees that take place at regular intervals (frequency depends on the framework (exchange at the faculty level)), the exchange at the planning level is guaranteed and a recognisable exchange takes place there constantly. The planning within the study programme is supported by the quality management system on the part of the university. The panel of experts found stringent planning and implementation.

Appropriate and fundamentally sufficient equipment is available for the degree programmes. The equipment for teaching is to be assessed positively: The study programmes have enough financial, personnel, spatial and technical equipment. The study programmes receive considerable financial support, and enough teaching staff is available for teaching so that the curriculum can be carried out as planned. Two computer rooms are appropriately equipped for the use of GIS applications and other software. For the study programme, the corresponding laboratories (CIP pool) are satisfactorily equipped and provided with all the necessary licences for study. Satisfactory and sufficient spatial resources are available at the university, and enough rooms with modern equipment are available for teaching to ensure smooth teaching. Other equipment relevant to the study (tools such as digital surveying and field equipment as well as tools for measurements in the field of climatology) are also sufficiently available and used accordingly in teaching. It was apparent to the reviewers that the degree programmes are appropriately equipped for teaching and that there are no deficiencies in the equipment aspect.

An adequate number of qualified staff is available for the degree programmes, which guarantees smooth operation. However, it should be noted that the professors generally have a high workload. This could have a direct impact on research and teaching. The panel of experts agrees to the opinion of the teaching staff that there should be relief for tasks in the laboratory and for field work because this would be a great support. On the basis of the documents provided by SQU and the discussions lead, the panel of experts concludes that there are several professors involved in teaching and research, but there is hardly any staff to support them.

In the GIS labs, there is appropriate support through the two staff members, but hardly any in the other areas. The professors are doing a great job, but that they have to struggle with the fact that they have to take on a large number of tasks. Relieving the burden on them through an additional position would be very helpful. SQU is to outline a personnel development concept for the Department of Geography for the next five years, with the objective of supporting the staff (and to further encourage and promote the high standard of teaching) **[Finding 17]**.

The libraries on site are satisfactorily equipped. On the one hand, there is the main library, which is comprehensively equipped. There is also a library at the faculty itself, where books and literature are provided. There, students have the opportunity to find or purchase subject-specific literature. Students also have access to the common literature and scientific writings that are used within the degree programmes.

For new students, there is a satisfactory range of services at the university so that they can find their way in the degree programmes. Events at the beginning help students to get to know the university and the premises. The university accompanies students through appropriate counselling centres at the beginning of their studies, which continues throughout their studies. There is also a good offer for potential students to find out about the degree programmes in advance; relevant information material can be viewed on the degree programme website.

The university offers a comprehensive range of support services: A counselling centre is available for students to access and receive academic, educational, psychological, social and cultural services. The university has a variety of facilities that support students: The university has a Community Service and Continuing Education Centre, Information Services, Educational Technology, Preparatory Studies, Career Guidance and the Student Guidance Centre itself. It became obvious to the panel of experts how much the different centres and units work together and are interconnected. The benefit to the students has become very clear as this support amounts to the successful completion of the degree. There is also a comprehensive offer on the part of the college to support the students during their studies. Through regular consultation hours, students have the opportunity to contact the professors and receive support. The evaluators are very satisfied with the offer and see how the provision of the offer contributes to students being supported within their studies.

Students have to option at SQU to get fully supported when they want to study at abroad. Applications for the offers and assistance are intended to ensure that students are supported. However, within Geography, there is a very small number of students, if any, who took this offer. The reasons are not fully transparent to the panel of experts. It is obvious that there is support for the students and systems and provision are in place to foster mobility, but no analysis of the reasons for the situation can be provided by the experts because of a lack of information on the motivation of the students.

Students are comprehensively supported by SQU in finding practical experience and internships. Through an established and constant exchange with practice partners and the ministries or organs of the government in Oman, a good cooperation has been established between the university and the partners. The students also benefit from this good relationship, as this network is used extensively so that they can gain comprehensive experience within their studies. This cooperation is also very good for job placement, as both groups of actors benefit from the cooperation and mutual relationship.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

7. Information

Bachelor's/Master's degree

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

[ESG 1.8]

Description

In the SER it is described that the University and the College of Arts and Social Sciences communicate with the public regularly through annual reports, which contain pertinent information on their teaching and learning, research, and community service achievements. The Department of Planning and Statistics, with particular planning functions, was established at the University to examine all development proposals and offer appropriate suggestions based on scientific planning principles. Accurate data and reliable progress reports for decision-makers are available. The Deanship of admissions and registration manages statistics on college enrolment and student demographics. Additionally, the College of Arts and Social Sciences collects data on research publications and community service activities each year for its annual report.

Experts' evaluation

The University admission process is well documented and is available to the general public on their website. The minimum qualification required for the course is also conveyed through the website. The University also has an open camp once a year open for the public which provides information to prospective students. The webpage for the department has all the information on the learning outcomes, the selection procedures, and the teaching staff. The degree plan provides an overall view of the courses and the credits for each course as well as any prerequisite for the course. There is not much information available on the assessment procedures for the general public, though it is available to the students through the student portal.

Other than the information regarding the degree programme and the course information. The geography department organizes events, where the labour market representatives provide the students with more information on their business and the current trends in the specialization. There is an annual meeting with labour market representatives and the teaching staff of geography department to discuss qualifications as well as the curriculum. This facilitates fine tuning of the curriculum based on the trends that is seen in the labour market and helps in creating a more productive and market ready labour force.

The University has an extensive and well-organized Quality Assurance system in place. A special quality assurance office makes available statistical data regarding study progress, length of studies or the number of students who require special attention due to low performance. Other than this the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) has founded the Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation Unit (QAAU). This Unit takes assessments from the current students as well as feedback from past students and job market representatives to revise the Quality assurance systems in the college. The QA processes followed seem healthy. There is also a three-year review of the college where the evaluation results are reviewed along with the action plan.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

V. Recommendation of the panel of experts

The panel of experts recommends accrediting the Bachelor's programme "Geography" offered by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) with conditions.

The panel of experts recommends accrediting the Master's programme "Geography" offered by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) with conditions.

Commendation:

The panel of experts got a very good impression of the teaching staff. They are well organised, highly motivated and competent. The effort the Department of Geography takes to prepare the students well for the labour market is obvious and appreciated. The focus on GIS is in accordance with the needs of the labour market. The support structures for students are well implemented and seem to work well.

Findings:

1. The panel of experts recommends to create larger modules to increase the integration of methodological skills like field work and research methods.
2. The course descriptions must be revised to present the anticipated qualifications described as Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) in a transparent way. All descriptions of the programme must be bundled in a kind of handbook and this document must be complete.
3. A policy on recognition must be provided by SQU.
4. The panel of experts recommends that the internationalization should be strengthened, i.e. by providing more options for international exchange for staff and students.
5. A description of the process how the course handbook is regularly updated according to current developments, including the references/academic literature to be read should be handed in.
6. The workload and the expectations for the Master's thesis should be more transparent to prospective students.
7. A clearer profile of the Master's programme or at least more obvious specialization options should be developed to make it more attractive for international students.
8. The workload of the teaching staff should be evaluated and adapted (if necessary).
9. It is recommended that significant English-language components continue to be taught in the Master's programme in the future.
10. The introduction of an internship in the Master's programme is recommended.
11. To close the quality cycle and to foster the motivation of the students to participate in questionnaires they have to be informed about the outcomes of the student surveys in an adequate manner.
12. The panel of experts recommends that the QA system involves representatives of the students more directly in the process and meetings.
13. Recognizing the importance of theoretical foundations, the experts also recommend to implement teaching methods combining scientific theory and practical application.

14. It is recommended to reduce the number of purely knowledge-based examinations and instead expanding other, more flexible forms of performance assessment (essays, short research reports, oral presentations, poster presentations, etc.).
15. The panel recommends to all responsible persons to also allow for multi-day excursions and field courses and to transparently anchor these in the curriculum.
16. SQU should hand in a concept for strengthening the research activities at the Department of Geography further and how the central level supports it.
17. SQU is to outline a personnel development concept for the Department of Geography for the next five years, with the objective of supporting the staff.