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QUALITÄTSSICHERUNG DURCH
AKKREDITIERUNG VON
STUDIENGÄNGEN E.V.

FINAL REPORT

SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY

MASS COMMUNICATION

MASS COMMUNICATION (BACHELOR OF ARTS)

MASS COMMUNICATION (MASTER OF ARTS)

MASS COMMUNICATION (PHD)

October 2025



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DECISION OF THE AQAS STANDING COMMISSION ON THE STUDY PROGRAMMES

- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (BACHELOR OF ARTS)
- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (MASTER OF ARTS)
- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (PHD)

OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, MUSCAT, OMAN

Based on the report of the expert panel, the comments by the university, and the discussion of the AQAS Standing Commission in its 26th meeting on 8 September 2025, the AQAS Standing Commission decides in a circulation process on 16 October 2025:

1. The study programmes “**Mass Communication**” (Bachelor of Arts), “**Mass Communication**” (Master of Arts), and “**Mass Communication**” (PhD) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University** are accredited according to the AQAS Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Bachelor/Master) and the AQAS Criteria for Doctoral Programme Accreditation (PhD).

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 October 2026**. 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. October 2031**, provided that the conditions listed below are fully met. Otherwise, the accreditation may be withdrawn.

Conditions:

1. **BA:** To achieve a higher level of transparency for the students, SQU must develop and publish detailed **programme-level Intended Learning Outcomes** that are aligned with national and international qualification frameworks and mapped clearly to the curriculum.
2. The **information on the programmes** that are available to students must be revised.
 - a. **BA & MA:** SQU must publish a comprehensive module handbook, ideally including aspects such as course descriptions, learning objectives, assessment methods, and pre/co-requisites.
 - b. **BA & MA:** SQU must clearly indicate the complete workload expectations for each course and transparently outline credit allocation in the module handbook.
 - c. **BA:** The **purpose and the ILOs of internships** must be clarified and standardised in the documents.
 - d. **PhD:** SQU must revise its current **regulations on PhD admission and progression** to make them more comprehensive.

3. SQU must establish and document reliable and transparent processes for collecting and **publishing evidence from graduate surveys and labour market feedback** to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and its relevance to employment.
4. SQU must integrate **practical components** in its teaching, especially at the postgraduate level, through workshops, collaborative projects, guest lectures, and digital media labs.
5. SQU must make the **process of student appeals** visible on departmental and university portals.
6. A standardised system for the **conversion of ECTS** must be implemented at SQU to promote student mobility.
7. **PhD**: The maximum time limit for examiners to assess the thesis via the Thesis Report Form must be specified.

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

1. **BA & MA**: A table should be made available outlining the alignment of the national credit system with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).
2. **BA & MA**: It is recommended to enhance **interdisciplinary components**, also in the international context, by integrating topics like AI in media, communication ethics, media entrepreneurship, and social impact.
3. SQU **should map teaching methods explicitly to ILOs**, ensuring that each course and module uses teaching strategies appropriate to the competencies being developed.
4. **MA**: A **model study plan** should be developed and made publicly available.
5. **MA**: The **function and weight of the final thesis** should be clarified and transparent information on supervision, assessment rubrics, and expected learning outcomes should be provided.
6. **MA & PhD**: It is recommended to monitor which areas of expertise (university or non-university context) external examiners come from.
7. SQU should revise the **documents provided to PhD students to improve transparency**:
 - a. It is recommended to develop a **model progression plan for PhD students** outlining which steps need to be taken at which time during their studies (e.g., scheduling, publication of papers).
 - b. SQU should describe the graduate profile of the PhD programme and make it publicly available to all stakeholders.
8. **PhD**: SQU should consider covering various postgraduate needs by establishing a postgraduate school/forum which offers courses that prepare graduates for their future jobs in terms of soft skills, computational skills, methodological skills, interdisciplinary skills, foreign language skills, and other supplementary requirements.
9. It is recommended that the **data on the student body** that are collected on central level are made available to those responsible for the study programmes.
10. SQU should put mechanisms in place to ensure that the **feedback loops in QA**, especially for student course evaluations, are closed.

11. It is recommended to adopt and implement a **clear teaching and learning strategy** across all levels of the Mass Communication programmes, emphasising student-centred, active, and inclusive pedagogies.
12. **A standardised mechanism for the recognition of informal prior learning** should be implemented in line with the national regulations to better cater to the diverse educational background of prospective students.
13. SQU should establish a reliable and transparent procedure for the integration of external **guest lecturers** to ensure their academic eligibility.
14. SQU should establish a **plan to extend support for international exposure** of their students and communicate existing options more efficiently.
15. SQU should **diversify assessment formats** to better evaluate critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and application of knowledge.
16. SQU should revise the published **assessment and examination regulations** to make them more transparent and comprehensive, especially for students.

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

EXPERTS' REPORT

ON THE STUDY PROGRAMMES

- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (BACHELOR OF ARTS)
- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (MASTER OF ARTS)
- “MASS COMMUNICATION” (PHD)

OFFERED BY SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, MUSCAT, OMAN

Visit to the university: 6-8 May 2025

Panel of experts:

Prof. Dr. Beatrice Dernbach	Professor of Communication Studies, Technische Hochschule Nürnberg Georg Simon Ohm (Germany)
Prof. Dr. Bassant Eyada	Professor of Advertising and IMC, Dean College of Media, City University Ajman (UAE)
Ms Fatma Al Arimi	Communications Specialist, FAO Oman, Muscat (Oman) (representative of the labour market)
Mr Lukas Hässner	Student at the University of Applied Sciences Mittweida (Germany) (student representative)

Coordinator:

Doris Herrmann

AQAS, Cologne, Germany

Jana Newiger

I. Preamble

AQAS – Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – is an independent non-profit organisation supported by nearly 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 programmes **“Mass Communication”** (Bachelor of Arts), **“Mass Communication”** (Master of Arts), and **“Mass Communication”** (PhD) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University**.

1. Criteria

Each programme is assessed against a set of criteria for accreditation developed by AQAS: the AQAS Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Bachelor/Master) and the AQAS Criteria for Doctoral Programme Accreditation (PhD). 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 can necessarily be applied to every programme.

2. Approach and methodology

Initialisation

The university mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in July 2024. The university produced a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). In January 2025, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation on the programmes and an appendix. The appendix included e.g.:

- an overview of statistical data of the student body (e.g. number of applications, beginners, students, graduates, student dropouts)
- the CVs of the teaching staff
- information on student services
- academic regulations

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility, and transparency. The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Standing Commission on 24 February 2025. The final version of the SER was submitted in March 2025.

Nomination of the expert panel

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the 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 March 2025. 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, a site visit at the university took place from 6-8 May 2025. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. representatives of the management of the higher education institution, the programme management, of teaching staff, as well as students and graduates, in separate discussion rounds and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings of the group of experts to university 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. The AQAS Standing Commission took its decision on the accreditation based on the discussion in its meeting on 8 September 2025 followed by a circulation process in October 2025. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

In November 2025, AQAS published the report, the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the members of the expert panel.

III. General information on the university

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was founded in 1986 with the following five colleges: Science, Engineering, Medicine, Education, and Agriculture. Over the years, further colleges got established: Arts and Social Sciences (1987), Commerce and Economics (1993), which was later renamed to Economics and Political Sciences, Law (2006), and Nursing (2008). The SER states that these nine colleges currently offer 38 PhD programmes, 74 postgraduate diplomas/Master's programmes, and 63 undergraduate programmes. SQU also hosts several research and support centres. The organisational structure of SQU includes a university council at the top which oversees the vice chancellor who in turn oversees the academic council. There are further three deputy vice chancellors installed for academic affairs and community service, administrative and financial affairs as well as postgraduate and research. SQU also has four central deanships in place that supervise admission and registration, student affairs, postgraduate studies, and research. The objectives of SQU are fourfold and focus on excelling in the areas of higher education, research, community service, and cooperation with other academic institutions.

College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS)

The College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) was established in 1987. It includes 12 departments, among them the Department of Mass Communication. The CASS is headed by a dean who is supported in his work by three assistant deans for undergraduate studies, postgraduate studies and research, and training and community service. The SER further states that the CASS encompasses a college board, a college administrator and their assistant, and a technical supervisor.

Department of Mass Communication (DMC)

The Department of Mass Communication (DMC) was established in 1987 with an emphasis on preparing Omani cadres interested in pursuing Mass Communication studies on all academic levels (BA, MA, PhD). Graduates of the DMC work in media and public relations organisations in Oman as well as internationally.

The DMC is overseen by the department board. The head of department is being supported by a department coordinator and several committees as well as programme coordinators. The SER states that the department's advisory committee was established for the second time in May 2015 to promote collaboration between the department and mass communication organisations both domestically and internationally regarding internship opportunities, guest speaking engagements, and job openings. The DMC engages in several strategic, social, and research projects and participates in local and international conferences.

According to the SER, the current staff of the DMC comprises 14 academic members who graduated from American, European, and Arab universities. There is also a coordinator, a training supervisor, and a technician specialising in broadcasting.

IV. Assessment of the study programmes

1. Quality of the curriculum / Aims and structure of the doctoral programme

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]

Doctoral 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 the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The academic level of graduates corresponds to with the requirements of the appropriate level of the national qualifications framework or the European Qualifications Framework.

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

[ESG 1.2].

The following are some general remarks on the discipline of Mass Communication by the experts which are not criteria-related, but nevertheless relevant for the further development of the programmes.

Media and journalism are undergoing significant transformations in response to the political, economic, social, and ecological shifts that are affecting the global society. Complex phenomena such as climate change, migration, pandemics, economic crises, and armed conflicts place considerable demands on journalistic practice. These challenges are further compounded by technological advancements – most notably the rise of artificial intelligence, which is already shaping media landscapes, both as a tool for research and in the production of content. It is widely anticipated that in the future AI will also contribute to a reduction in employment within the media sector.

At the same time, various studies – particularly the annual World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders – show that media organisations around the globe, especially those relying on private funding, are increasingly subject to political and, more critically, economic pressures. In the context of such dynamic and multidimensional change, the education and training of professional communicators – journalists in particular – presents a formidable challenge.

Study programmes in Journalism and Mass Communication face a particular structural dilemma: while they must equip students with the qualifications required for the labour market, they are also bound by the distinct principles and objectives of higher education institutions. For instance, incoming students must be able to rely on the stability of programme structures to complete their studies within the standard period.

Against this background, many educational academic sources distinguish between competencies, knowledge, and skills. The former primarily involve knowledge as a cognitive competence or the reflection on knowledge. Skills are often understood as more technical, manual, and methodological practices. In its Media and Information Literacy Framework (MIL), the UNESCO describes the two essential pillars of competence that apply to all people in the modern world, but especially to journalists: “MIL is defined as a set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create, as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities.”¹ While the broader context of the Mass Communication field will not be further discussed at this point, it should be noted that it is generally crucial to maintain a balance between skills and competencies in the curricula of Mass Communication programmes to ensure a solid theoretical foundation while still meeting the demands of the labour market.

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/UNESCO-Media-and-Information-Literacy-Framework-and-Recent-Initiatives.pdf>.

1.1 Mass Communication (Bachelor of Arts)

Description

The full-time undergraduate programme of Mass Communication has been running since 1987. Between 40-45 students are admitted per academic year. The programme was last internationally accredited in 2019 when it received an unconditional accreditation.

According to the SER, the curriculum is designed to equip students with skills and knowledge that enable them to work in media and communication organisations. More specifically, the graduate profile includes

- Journalists, producers, and content creators in print, digital, and audiovisual media organisations
- Public relations practitioners in both state and private sectors
- Private entrepreneurs with their own media consultancy companies

Against this background, the SER cites the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the programme to focus on the four areas of technical skills, communication skills, research skills, and professional skills. To achieve the ILOs, the curriculum comprises compulsory and elective courses in the following areas:

- Core courses Mass Communication (at programme level)
- Minor courses (Journalism, Broadcasting, Public Relations)
- Character development (at university level)
- Language, literature, and social sciences (at college level)
- Supporting courses (liberal arts) (offered by other programmes)

The compulsory core and minor courses make up approximately two thirds of the entire curriculum. In addition to the core curriculum, students can enhance their skills through external workshops and training courses. The curriculum also includes a mandatory internship. A course handbook is available online in which the programme specifics are documented.

According to the SER, the curriculum is outcome-based as graduate attributes are mapped with the ILOs and each course contributes to meeting the ILOs. The SER further states that it aligns with level 8 of the Omani Qualification Framework (OQF) for undergraduate degrees and SQU's guidelines for curriculum development.

SQU has several policies in place to periodically review and develop the curriculum which take into account latest trends in the field, national and institutional policies as well as internal and external stakeholder feedback. In urgent cases, partial curriculum reviews are permitted as well.

Since the last accreditation in 2019, the programme has undergone several changes to its curriculum which include the replacement of courses, aligning learning outcomes with the OQF, updating curriculum content, and implementing new teaching and learning strategies.

Expert evaluation

Based on the documentation provided by the university and the on-site visit, the experts assess that the Mass Communication Bachelor's programme generally meets the academic expectations of a Level 6 qualification under the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), where applicable, and the comparable level of the national framework. The curriculum encompasses theoretical, analytical, and practical elements. The intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the programme are broadly described in various programme documents. However, while the department provides general information on the academic structure and specialisations, the presentation of the desired qualifications as formal, structured ILOs is not fully explicit or clearly documented and the alignment of programme- and course-level ILOs with the curriculum is not clearly mapped or referenced in official documents. SQU must therefore develop and publish detailed programme-level ILOs that are aligned with national and international qualification frameworks and mapped clearly to the curriculum (**Finding**

1). In addition, the mention of research components is minimal, and where present, lacks clarity regarding expectations and assessment methods. In some courses, the assessments throughout the weekly schedule are the same for every week. There is also insufficient evidence that students' achievement of the ILOs is formally demonstrated through capstone assessments. SQU must therefore publish a comprehensive and complete module handbook, ideally including course descriptions, learning objectives, assessment methods, and pre/co-requisites (**Finding 2a**).

Regarding the workload and credit allocation, the overall credit structure appears consistent with standard undergraduate programmes, but workload per course, contact hours, and independent learning expectations are not well articulated. The ECTS alignment is implied but not explicitly described or justified. SQU must therefore clearly indicate the complete workload expectations for each course and transparently outline credit allocation in the module handbook (**Finding 2b**). In addition, a table should be made available outlining the alignment of the national credit system with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (**Finding 2c**).

The curricular structure supports learner progression through a traditional layout of foundation, core, and specialisation courses. Practical courses and internships are present in the curriculum. However, the definition, scope, ILOs, and assessment criteria of internships are not comprehensively documented or publicly accessible. No MOUs or agreements with labour market for internships exist. SQU must therefore clarify and standardise the documentation of the purpose and the ILOs of internships (**Finding 2d**). In this context, it might be beneficial to formulate MOUs with internship workplaces to support reliable and transparent standardisation of internships.

The programme has an evident focus on subject-specific knowledge such as journalism, public relations, and broadcasting, yet interdisciplinary elements such as integration with digital media technologies, cultural studies, or media law are either insufficiently articulated or not fully embedded in the programme's stated ILOs. Moreover, while methodological skills are introduced, general skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, or digital fluency are not always explicitly included or assessed. This limits the programme's ability to present a cohesive set of qualifications aligned with both academic depth and cross-disciplinary breadth, also in an international context. The experts therefore recommend enhancing interdisciplinary components, also in the international context, by integrating topics like AI in media, communication ethics, media entrepreneurship, and social impact (**Finding 3**).

Regarding the alignment of the ILOs with both academic expectations and labour market requirements, there is partial evidence of relevance, especially in the inclusion of practical training components and media production labs. However, there is limited documented evidence (such as graduate employment data, industry feedback, or formal employer surveys) that systematically confirms how well the learning outcomes reflect real-world professional demands. Moreover, the mechanisms for updating ILOs in response to current developments in the communication field appear to be informal. There is no clear documentation of how academic staff regularly review, revise, or validate learning outcomes in consultation with stakeholders or based on trends in the media industry. As for evidence supporting the appropriateness of the ILOs, there is no visible proof of structured graduate surveys, alumni tracking, or feedback loops with industry partners that assess the relevance and effectiveness of the outcomes. This is a significant area of weakness. External feedback, especially from the private and public media sectors, is essential for continuous improvement and quality assurance in communication programmes. Against this background, SQU must establish and document reliable and transparent processes for collecting and publishing evidence from graduate surveys and labour market feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and its relevance to employment (**Finding 4**).

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

1.2 Mass Communication (Master of Arts)

Description

The Master's programme of Mass Communication has been running since 2005. Between 15-20 students are admitted per academic year. The programme can be studied full-time with a regular study period of 4 semesters or be extended to 6 semesters when studied part-time. Three specialisations are available to choose from: Journalism and Electronic Publishing, Radio and Television, and Public Relations and Advertising. The programme has a strong focus on research as many students are already employed. Its primary objective is therefore to foster advanced academic skills rather than address specific employment prerequisites. The programme was last internationally accredited in 2019 when it received an unconditional accreditation.

According to the SER, the programme aims to equip students with advanced education and research skills in communication and media as well as enable them to identify communication and media-related issues, develop solutions through scientific research, and enhance their ability to conduct specialised scientific research in communication and media.

The curriculum comprises compulsory and elective courses for the major (18 credit hours) and the respective minor (6 credit hours) as well as the Master's thesis (6 credit hours). The thesis also includes an oral defence. The SER identifies six ILOs of the programme:

- Design and conduct scientific and applied research in communication and media
- Analyse and address administrative and organisational challenges in media institutions, public relations, and media departments within government and private entities while providing various media and communication services
- Apply diverse knowledge aspects to make strategic media decisions
- Utilise critical thinking skills to acquire knowledge, manage research, and discuss emerging trends in various communication and media fields
- Develop lifelong self-learning skills
- Design training programmes tailored for media professionals based on modern trends in the field

According to the SER, the ILOs provide a comprehensive educational experience in media and communication. Initially, students are expected to acquire a robust foundation in key media and communication theories, emphasising their historical development and relevance in contemporary contexts. Building on this foundational knowledge, students are encouraged to critically engage with emerging media technologies and social changes to enhance their analytical and research capabilities. Through this progressive learning structure, students are supposed to develop advanced research skills, critical thinking, and the capacity to present well-founded arguments orally and in writing. The programme further aims to develop practical media production skills, particularly in radio and television, equipping students with the tools to produce structured research outputs and apply research methods in professional settings. The SER states that the alignment between the programme's courses and its overarching objectives is hence achieved by intentionally selecting content that emphasises both theoretical knowledge and practical application. As the integration of teaching and research is cited to be a fundamental aspect of the programme, research activities are embedded in the curriculum in various ways such as research projects, literature reviews, and workshops, according to the SER.

As for the maintenance and development of the curriculum, the SER states that there are mechanisms in place to ensure regular updates and the collection of feedback from students.

Expert evaluation

Based on the documentation provided by the university and the on-site visit, the experts assess that the Mass Communication Master's programme generally meets the academic expectations of a Level 7 qualification

under the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), where applicable, and the corresponding level of the national framework. The curricular structure is coherent in its division between coursework and thesis components, supporting progression from foundational to advanced topics. The desired qualifications of the programme are generally communicated through broad programme descriptions and course listings. However, these qualifications are not consistently presented as explicit, measurable ILOs across the programme. While there are references to advanced knowledge and research skills, there is a lack of formal documentation that clearly maps these outcomes to individual courses or to the overall academic progression of the student. Course descriptions, if available, do not consistently define learning objectives, competencies developed, or assessment strategies. SQU must therefore publish a comprehensive and complete module handbook, ideally including course descriptions, learning objectives, assessment methods, and pre/co-requisites (see **Finding 2a**). In addition, a recommended study plan is not provided, making it difficult for students or reviewers to evaluate academic planning and time management expectations. To facilitate learner progression, a model study plan should be developed and made publicly available (**Finding 5**). Students enrolled in the programme might also benefit from a publicly available curriculum map that shows how each course contributes to the achievement of specific learning outcomes.

Regarding the workload and credit allocation, while the overall credit structure appears consistent with common postgraduate standards (typically 30–36 credit hours), there is no clear breakdown of workload expectations per course, including contact hours, independent study, or thesis supervision. Likewise, the credit allocation per module lacks justification or linkage to expected student effort, making transparency in workload distribution inadequate. SQU must therefore clearly indicate the workload expectations for each course and transparently outline credit allocation in the module handbook (see **Finding 2b**). In addition, a table should be made available outlining the alignment of the national credit system with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (see **Finding 2c**).

While the curriculum does cover subject-specific knowledge, it falls short in terms of explicitly integrating cross-subject and methodological skills such as leadership, ethical reasoning, strategic planning, and digital innovation. The inclusion of interdisciplinary elements such as data analytics, AI in media, media policy, or international communication is limited in both scope and depth and not integrated as core competencies within the ILOs. General academic skills like project management, academic writing, and research ethics are not systematically embedded across the curriculum. The experts therefore recommend enhancing interdisciplinary and methodological components, also in the international context, by integrating courses or modules on emerging themes such as media ethics, AI in communication, digital storytelling, and cross-cultural leadership (see **Finding 3**). Against this background, it might be beneficial to teach some of these topics in English to further promote the students' English language proficiency and account for the international character of the field.

The thesis requirement is a strength of the programme, providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate mastery of research methods and subject knowledge. Nonetheless, the criteria for thesis assessment, expected outcomes, and supervision structures are not fully detailed or accessible. The experts therefore recommend clarifying the function and weight of the final thesis, and providing transparent information on supervision, assessment rubrics, and expected learning outcomes (**Finding 6**). In this context, it is recommended to monitor which areas of expertise (university or non-university context) external examiners come from (**Finding 7**). In addition, the experts learned that Master's theses in the programme can currently be written in English or Arabic. Against this background, to enhance the graduates' chances to pursue a career beyond the Arabic speaking world, the expert panel deems it beneficial to encourage students to write their Master's thesis in English or at least include an English abstract. This will also support SQU's efforts to promote internationalisation at their university.

The extent to which the ILOs reflect both academic standards and labour market requirements is partially evident through the inclusion of research components and professional communication courses. However, there is insufficient structured evidence that these outcomes are regularly reviewed or updated to align with

current developments in the communication field, including digital transformation, global media trends, or industry feedback. Regarding the evidence supporting the appropriateness of learning outcomes, there is no visible documentation of graduate surveys, employer feedback, or tracer studies. While on the central level, general data on graduates is collected, data for a detailed analysis does not seem to be available on faculty level. This represents a missed opportunity to evaluate how well the programme is preparing graduates for professional roles or doctoral studies. Without such data, it is difficult to assess the programme's responsiveness to stakeholder expectations and labour market shifts. SQU must therefore establish and document reliable and transparent processes for collecting and publishing evidence from graduate surveys and labour market feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and its relevance to employment (see **Finding 4**).

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

1.3 Mass Communication (PhD)

Description

The PhD programme of Mass Communication has been running since September 2023. Between 3-5 students are admitted per academic year. The programme can be studied full-time with a regular study period of 8 semesters or be extended to 12 semesters when studied part-time. Under certain conditions, an extension of up to two semesters can be granted which is not added to the total study time. There are typical study plans available for the full-time and part-time option respectively.

According to the SER, the PhD in Mass Communication is a research-oriented programme with the following five objectives:

- Promote the analytical, explanatory, and critical skills of the programme affiliates to enable them to offer media-related consultations based on scientific research to various governmental and private institutions
- Qualify the programme affiliates and enhance their critical and analytical skills and capabilities in different communication and media studies to engage in media education, both inside the Sultanate and abroad
- Provide students with the necessary skills to prepare solid scientific research in Mass Communication
- Enable students to understand and apply interdisciplinary studies in the field of Mass Communication
- Meet the labour market's demand for research and media studies in the Sultanate and the Arab region

To achieve these objectives, the SER identifies 7 ILOs:

- Prepare communication and media studies specialists with extensive and up-to-date knowledge about the latest developments and contemporary media-related issues
- Apply the acquired knowledge in media studies, prepare in-depth media research and offer media consultations
- Prepare qualified researchers capable of discussing and resolving media-related problems
- Enhance critical thinking skills and the ability to formulate strategic media policies
- Develop the skills of graduates to enable them to offer the best media-related services and consultations to the government and private institutions by promoting their ability to communicate effectively with top-brass management
- Conduct training courses in the area of media and consolidate cooperation with the various institutions to conduct national research in media
- Set the path for the graduation of talented, creative, and innovative researchers in media studies

Against this background, the SER states that the ILOs are in line with both SQU's Defining Characteristics of Postgraduate Students and the Standards of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA).

According to the SER, designing and approving the programme included various committees, internal and external stakeholders as well as benchmarking with universities both in the region and worldwide that offer similar PhD programmes. There is no minimum coursework requirement for the PhD programme. However, the Department Postgraduate Studies Committee or the Thesis Committee may specify specific coursework requirements deemed in an individual candidate's interest. These requirements must be completed within the first year of study. To graduate, Doctoral candidates must write a thesis containing original work of suitable merit to demonstrate their command of the relevant research methodology and their ability to undertake independent research. Theses can be written in Arabic or in English. The thesis should significantly contribute to knowledge in media and mass communication studies, as demonstrated by at least one published peer-reviewed journal paper or accepted for publication and presenting a paper at an international academic conference.

Expert evaluation

The PhD programme first started in 2023. In the on-site meeting with students of the Mass Communication programme (all levels), the experts had the chance to talk with one of those PhD students who evaluated their study programme positively. Because this is a relatively new programme, the reaccreditation of the programme in six years should focus more on student data that will be available then as well as on some broader experiences with graduates' success in the labour market.

The PhD programme of Mass Communication at SQU can be studied both full-time and part-time. The option to pursue the degree on a part-time basis meets the requirements for employment opportunities as well as family friendliness. Both domestic and international candidates are selected through a qualitative process in which both groups are considered equally.

Based on the documentation provided by SQU and the discussion on site, the experts assess that the seven ILOs defined for the programme meet the required level 8 according to the EQF and the Omani NQF. However, they appear to focus heavily on methodological and professional skills, and less on academic knowledge and its reflective application. In addition, the experts were not able to fully grasp the intended graduate profile of the programme, i.e., whether they are being prepared for junior faculty positions or the international job market. This aspect is particularly relevant as the domestic job market offers few career opportunities for PhD graduates of the programme as was reported by representatives of the labour market on site. Against this background, SQU should describe the graduate profile of the PhD programme and make it publicly available to all stakeholders (**Finding 8a**). This will also provide the opportunity to address some of the topics mentioned in the general remarks above.

The global societal challenges require interdisciplinary discussions that include diverse cultural and academic perspectives and the joint development of solutions. Currently, there are few options for PhD candidates to present, advance, and discuss their work in an interdisciplinary context. SQU should therefore consider covering various postgraduate needs by establishing a postgraduate school/forum which offers courses that prepare graduates for their future jobs in terms of soft skills, computational skills, methodological skills, interdisciplinary skills, foreign language skills, and other supplementary requirements (**Finding 9**). This could for example include academic presenting and publishing as well as writing joint proposals for research projects. In this context, the experts learned that PhD theses in the programme can currently be written in English or Arabic. However, media are developed, exist, and change always within the broader context of international political, economic, and social conditions. Against this background, to conduct fundamental research that has an impact beyond the Arabic speaking world, the expert panel deems it beneficial to encourage PhD students to write their thesis in English or at least include an English abstract. This will also enhance international visibility not only for the conducted research but for the entire PhD programme.

Conclusion

The criterion is 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]

Doctoral 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

The SER states that SQU's Quality Assurance Office was established in 2010 to support and coordinate the quality assurance procedures and policies. The vice chancellor is in charge of QA processes at SQU. He is supported by the director of the quality assurance office who oversees the work of the deputy directors for (1) administration, financial & technical quality, (2) academic programmes & community service, and (3) institutional & scientific research.

At college level, the SER states that CASS has created quality indicators and practices to meet its own institutional demands. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) was established in 2011 as part of CASS's implementation of the six steps of the Total Quality Management (TQM) System. The committee consists of the accreditation officer, rapporteur, and executive supervisor of academic accreditation from each CASS department. Its staff carries out administrative work and fosters a productive workplace environment for instruction and learning. The QAAC also attends to student needs.

To evaluate the effectiveness of assessments, SQU employs semester reports (including course effectiveness, student performance, and alignment with programme objectives) to the head of department, student and faculty feedback at the end of each semester (Course and Teaching Survey, CTS), focus groups, accreditation reviews, and documentation and reporting on progress and challenges in connection with the programmes.

Several committees and boards are responsible for the coordination of the programmes. Among others, they are the Academic Affairs Committee, the Department Council, the External Advisory Board, and the

Specialisation Coordination Committee. These bodies support the coordination of the programmes via consultations, course documentation, specialisation plan updates, and the collection of stakeholder feedback.

In addition, there are said to be measures in place to prevent content and scheduling overlaps. Committees and coordinators for both the Bachelor's and the Master's programme respectively are supposed to ensure that courses align with the programmes learning objectives, supported by continuous feedback from both internal and external stakeholders as well as regular reviews. Measures to define and continuously evaluate student workload include workload definition, evaluation of workload, curriculum adjustments, assessment reforms, and other support measures such as tutorials.

In response to the last accreditation of the Bachelor's and Master's Mass Communication programmes, the SER states that certain modifications were implemented. Among others, QA processes have been adjusted on department level to include a follow-up process for tracking the careers of graduates.

Expert evaluation

Procedures and policies for quality assurance are overall well-structured and comprehensive at SQU, from the central management through the director of the responsible office down to the level of colleges and departments. On central level, SQU collects comprehensive data on students such as allocation of study places, enrolment numbers, dropout rates, and evaluation results. However, during the on-site discussions the experts learned that these data do not appear to be available to the department. As a result, the experts were not able to get a clear picture about the student-to-teacher ratio during the site visit. This is particularly relevant as the documentation provided on the Master's programme displays a discrepancy between the number of admitted students, dropouts, and graduates. The experts therefore recommend that the collected data on the student body documented by SQU on a central level are made available to those responsible for the study programme (**Finding 10**).

During the on-site discussion with students, they confirmed that they regularly evaluate the courses. These evaluations are based on anonymous surveys. However, the students reported that they don't always receive feedback on the results or the impact of their evaluation. While some lecturers discuss evaluation results in class before the end of the semester, which can also include a mediator, if necessary, this does not appear to be a constant and reliable part of the evaluation process. SQU should therefore put mechanisms in place to ensure that the feedback loops for student course evaluations (but also for all other stakeholders) are closed (**Finding 11**). The experts further learned during the site visit that while the dean discusses repeated negative course evaluations with the respective lecturers, students don't always observe changes after providing feedback. During the discussion on site, they reported for example that more classes taught in English and a stronger focus on practical application of their skills is desired but has not been thoroughly considered as of yet. It might therefore be beneficial to consider student feedback more strongly when revising the study programmes.

Also in terms of programme development, there is limited documented evidence such as graduate employment data, industry feedback, or formal employer surveys that systematically assesses how well the ILOs of the programmes reflect real-world professional demands. Moreover, the mechanisms for updating ILOs in response to current developments in the communication field appear to be informal. There is no clear documentation of how the programmes are continuously revised and developed in consultation with the labour market. The same applies to the collection of feedback from graduates such as surveys or alumni tracking. This is a significant area of weakness as external feedback, especially from the private and public media sectors, is essential for continuous improvement and quality assurance in mass communication programmes. Against this background, SQU must establish and document reliable and transparent processes for collecting and

publishing evidence from graduate surveys and labour market feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and its relevance to employment (see **Finding 4**).

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

3. Learning, teaching and assessment of students / Learning 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]

Doctoral degree

The form of supervision and/or course structure is adequate and corresponds with the intended learning outcomes.

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

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

[ESG 1.3]

Description

The SER states that the Bachelor's programme of Mass Communication employs diverse teaching and learning methods which are supposed to blend theoretical knowledge with practical application. Among the teaching and learning methods are interactive methods (e.g., conduct interviews, create podcasts), research-based learning (e.g., conduct in-depth studies, analytical assignments), project-based learning (individual and collaborative projects), guest lectures, the flipped classroom approach, technology-based learning, collaborative and team-based learning, and game-based learning. By integrating traditional and modern pedagogy in the teaching and learning methods, SQU aims to implement a holistic approach to education which equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to face real-world challenges. The diverse learning and teaching methods are further designed to cater to the diverse needs of students by also taking into account challenges faced by international students and those with special needs. This includes offering different instructional methods (e.g., lectures, seminars, workshops, practical sessions) to accommodate different learner styles as well as the use of technology and online resources, practical experiences, and extra-curricular activities. According to the SER, this represents a student-oriented learning approach which is reflected through the focus on active engagement of students, personalised support, and opportunities for practical application. Students are further encouraged to pursue research projects and to participate in conferences. They can also join extracurricular activities, such as media competitions, guest lectures, and internships. For students with special needs, alternative learning methods are available.

Similarly to the Bachelor's programme, the Master's programme is said to integrate a multifaceted pedagogical approach, combining tutor-led lectures, small group collaborations, and student-led seminars and presentations. This diversity in teaching methods is designed to foster an interactive and engaging student-centred learning environment. Methods of instruction include lectures, guest lectures, research projects, and group work. The SER defines the integration of teaching and research as a fundamental aspect of the programme. Research activities are said to be embedded in the curriculum at multiple levels, allowing students to actively

engage in research by presenting research summaries, collaborating on group research projects, and conducting literature reviews that apply course content to real-world media issues. Students also participate in departmental seminars and conferences, providing opportunities to engage with ongoing academic and professional research. To accommodate the diverse student needs, especially since the majority of students is already employed, measures such as blended and e-learning as well as flexible scheduling including evening lectures have been implemented for the Master's programme.

According to the SER, exams in the Bachelor's programme are divided into written exams and non-exam assessments to align with the respective intended learning outcomes (ILOs). Exam-related courses are designed to evaluate students' theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, and understanding of media concepts. These exams typically include multiple-choice questions, definitions, short-answer questions, and essay-type questions. Non-exam assessments are designed for production-based courses to evaluate practical skills in media production, editing, and reporting. These assessments include producing of news stories, editing videos, and designing media campaigns.

For the Master's programme, assessment methods are selected to evaluate the achievement of the ILOs. Methods include written exams, quizzes, papers, assignments, essays, project presentations, and literature reviews.

The exams are organised at designated times in the academic calendar. Midterm exams are usually conducted around the middle of the semester while final exams are scheduled during the official examination period at the end of the semester. For practical or project-based assessments, submission deadlines and evaluation dates are planned throughout the semester, often aligning with major course milestones. The Exam Committee at the department organises and oversees the examination timetable to avoid overlaps and coordinates with faculty and administrative staff to prepare examination venues and logistics. Examination dates are usually announced well in advance to ensure students have sufficient time to prepare. These dates are communicated through official channels such as the university's SIS system, academic calendars, or departmental email service. Midterm exam dates are often finalised by the respective instructors and shared in class or via email, while final exam schedules are typically coordinated by the university's registrar's office and published online. Re-sits are offered to students who fail or miss the initial examination due to valid reasons, such as illness or other exceptional circumstances. There is a plan in place for the organisation and announcement of resit exams. For students with special needs, alternative assessment methods are available. There are also mechanisms in place to take care of student appeals and complaints.

PhD programme

The SER states that students must present two discussion seminars before the department's faculty members during their study period. These seminars are scheduled within the department's discussion sessions. The purpose of these seminars is to provide students with constructive feedback on their research from the academic staff and to develop their skills in presenting and discussing their ideas. According to the 2018 Graduate Studies Academic Regulations, PhD students must undergo a preliminary oral examination no later than before the end of the third semester. After fulfilling the requirements of the two discussion seminars and upon the supervisory committee's approval of the dissertation's readiness for defence, the Department Board starts organising the defence. The Assistant Dean for Graduate Studies and Research submit the committee formation request to the Dean for approval within one month from the date of the second seminar.

Expert evaluation

The panel of experts got the impression during the discussion rounds that the learning and teaching methods implemented across the programmes show a commitment to traditional instruction, with elements of interactive

lectures, presentations, and assignments. However, the extent to which these methods contribute to a genuinely student-centred learning environment appears to be limited. While there is some evidence of student involvement in projects and individual assignments, the systematic integration of active learning strategies such as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, case studies, or project-based group work is not clearly demonstrated in the syllabi. There is limited flexibility in learning paths, and little documented evidence that the university has implemented pedagogical adjustments to reflect the diversity of students' learning needs or to stimulate higher levels of motivation, self-reflection, and engagement. The experts therefore recommend adopting and implementing a clear teaching and learning strategy across all levels of the Mass Communication programmes, emphasising student-centred, active, and inclusive pedagogies (**Finding 12**). In this context, the alignment between teaching methods and ILOs is not systematically presented. While course delivery includes lectures and some application-based tasks, there is no visible curriculum map or teaching strategy plan to show how specific teaching practices are chosen based on intended competencies or skill sets. As such, the pedagogical coherence between what is taught and what students are expected to achieve remains unclear. SQU must therefore map teaching methods explicitly to ILOs, ensuring that each course and module uses teaching strategies appropriate to the competencies being developed (**Finding 13**).

Regarding the transfer of knowledge to real-world contexts, there is insufficient structured support across the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. There are some references to internships or media practice within course listings, but these are not consistently designed or evaluated as formal components of the ILOs. Opportunities for practical engagement, such as simulated media campaigns, newsroom training, strategic communication labs, or public communication projects, are not sufficiently documented, limiting students' ability to apply theory to practice effectively. SQU must therefore integrate practical components in its teaching, especially at the postgraduate level, through workshops, collaborative projects, guest lectures, and digital media labs (**Finding 14**).

In terms of assessment, while exams and assignments are implemented, the assessment methods are not fully mapped to learning outcomes at the course or programme level. A limited range of assessment formats appears to be in use mostly exams, essays, and presentations without a clear demonstration of how these formats assess varied cognitive levels or practical competencies. There is little indication that students are familiarised with diverse and innovative formats of assessment. Especially at the postgraduate and doctoral levels, alternative assessment types, such as reflective journals, peer assessments, portfolios, or industry project evaluations, are not prominently used. SQU should therefore diversify assessment formats to better evaluate critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and application of knowledge (**Finding 15**).

Regulations and procedures on assessment and examination are available but not detailed enough in certain aspects. There is no comprehensive and transparent assessment policy document available online that clearly defines assessment rules, grading scales, exam responsibilities, or the timing of evaluations. Students may receive this information through individual faculty or course instructors, but the lack of comprehensive guidelines might lead to inconsistencies. SQU should therefore revise the published assessment and examination regulations to make them more transparent and comprehensive, especially for students (**Finding 16**).

Additionally for PhD students, but to a lesser degree also for Master's students, supervision structure plays a vital role in fostering academic progress. The Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Studies 2018 which are published by SQU outline the requirements for publication timing, thesis defence, and external examiners. Nevertheless, from the point of view of a PhD student or a reviewer, some aspects lack transparency. In this context, the maximum time limit for examiners to assess the thesis via the Thesis Report Form must be specified (**Finding 17**). It is further recommended to monitor which areas of expertise (university or non-university context) external examiners come from (see **Finding 7**). Since the programme only started in 2023, the completion of the first cohort must be awaited to further evaluate the process and the experiences of graduates.

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification / Legal status, admission 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]

Doctoral degree

The institution is entitled to award a doctorate.

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

[ESG 1.4]

Description

Admission

The SER states that admission to the Bachelor's programme is handled centrally through the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) under the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation. Admission criteria are detailed in the HEAC Student Guidebook, which is distributed to students in their final school year. To get admitted to the DMC, students must further Pass a Level 6 English Exit Placement Test conducted by SQU's Language Centre. Students who do not meet the required Level 6 in English must undertake intensive English courses for up to two semesters.

Candidates who apply for admission to the Master's programme should have a Bachelor's degree in Mass Communication or a related subject and must have a cumulative GPA of at least 2.75. English language proficiency is required as well and assessed before the start of the programme. All applicants must pass an admission exam and an interview. Experience of working in the media field counts toward the total mark. The SER outlines a structured process for the selection of suitable candidates.

Progression

According to the SER, SQU has a monitoring system for student learning progress in place which is overseen by academic advisors and the Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs. Each student is said to be assigned an academic advisor upon acceptance into the DMC. Advisors and students are responsible for ensuring adherence to the study plan. Communication between students and advisors is further facilitated via SQU's Student Information System (SIS), which enables advisors to provide feedback, recommendations, and course registration guidance. The SIS also provides comprehensive student data, including academic status, semester GPA, cumulative GPA, completed credit hours, and remaining hours to graduate.

For the Bachelor's programme, there is a system in place to regulate how many credit hours students can register for each semester, depending on their achievements. Data indicates that students usually graduate within the designated 8 semesters. In case of student failure, there is a process in place to deliver detailed feedback and improve student achievements.

Recognition

According to the SER, SQU has mechanisms in place to recognise external learning. The requirements and procedures for transfer to the Mass Communication programme from external institutions are said to be accessible on SQU's website.

In addition, SQU tracks the achievements of students and holds annual ceremonies to honour outstanding students. They are also nominated for exclusive opportunities such as participating in student trips and local and international events.

Certification

To graduate, students of the Bachelor's programme must complete all courses outlined in the study plan with a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.00 and fulfil any additional requirements of the programme such as non-credit summer training. Upon fulfilling graduation requirements, students are issued a Graduation Certificate, which includes their full name, programme, specialisation, GPA, and completion date.

Master's students must also complete all courses outlined in the study plan with a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.00. In addition, they must submit and defend their thesis within three semesters. Students who complete the courses but are unable to write a thesis are awarded only a higher diploma. Upon fulfilling graduation requirements, students are issued a Graduation Certificate, which includes their full name, programme, specialisation, GPA, and completion date.

PhD programme

The admission to the PhD programme is based on the Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Studies 2018. Prospective students require a Master's degree in Mass Communication from a recognised educational institution with a cumulative GPA of no less than 3.0 on a 4-point scale or equivalent or a pass/fail system, need to submit a comprehensive research proposal as well as two letters of recommendation, and must conduct an interview with the department's Graduate Studies Committee. In addition, applicants must demonstrate proficiency in English (a score of 5.5 in the IELTS or its equivalent in the TOEFL-IBT exam for students who submit their theses in Arabic/a score of 6.5 in the IELTS or its equivalent in the TOEFL-IBT exam for students who submit their dissertation in English).

Expert evaluation

Based on both the documentation provided by SQU and the discussions on site, the experts assess that the admission requirements and the admission procedures for all academic levels are clearly described and meet established standards. These requirements are sufficiently known to students who also confirmed the transparency of the procedures. For PhD applicants, a structured process including an interview, a written test, and a presentation of a research proposal is in place. However, it remains unclear which topics are accepted, and which are rejected. It is also unclear how long the resubmission period is after an initial topic rejection, as well as when and based on which criteria PhD students receive warnings for failing to meet their obligations. Therefore, SQU must revise its current regulations on PhD admission and progression to make them more comprehensive (**Finding 8b**).

For students transferring from other programmes or institutions, up to two semesters of bridging courses are offered, depending on their prior qualifications. The experts deem this practice very helpful with integrating students academically, even if the bridging courses might extend the overall study period slightly. Students confirmed that transfer of credits was possible in such cases.

In terms of monitoring the progression of students, they are aware of the academic regulations that are in place at SQU, including GPA requirements and consequences in case of poor academic performance. For example, students with a GPA below 2.0 are placed on probation and may be required to leave the programme if no improvement can be detected. This policy is introduced to students during orientation week. The orientation programme itself plays an important role in supporting the students' transition into university life and informing them about their rights and responsibilities.

The academic progress of students is supported by regular advising. Advisors are readily accessible, and communication happens through multiple channels, including the Student Information System (SIS) and informal tools like WhatsApp. At the same time, students reported that some study modules are repetitive or overly theoretical, which in their view hampers progression. Especially Master's students noted that many courses are similar in terms of content despite of being titled differently and in this context voiced their desire for more differentiation and practical relevance (see **Findings 3 & 14**).

Overall, students showed awareness of appeal processes and confirmed that feedback mechanisms exist, though the effectiveness of these depends heavily on the lecturer. It is unclear to which extent this process is formalized and accessible. Similarly, there is no publicly available information about the possibility of re-sitting exams, compensatory measures for illness, or accommodations for special needs. These are essential components of a fair and inclusive assessment system and should be clearly defined and communicated. SQU must therefore make the process of student appeals visible on departmental and university portals (**Finding 18**).

Recognition of prior learning is practiced at SQU, but mostly in formal and domestic academic contexts, i.e., credit transfers from other higher education institutions within Oman. On site, the experts learned that there is currently no standardised mechanism in place to convert ECTS to the local credit system and vice versa as there are no national regulations in place. Therefore, a standardised system for the conversion of ECTS must be implemented at SQU to promote student mobility (**Finding 19**). Recognition of informal learning was not mentioned during the discussions on site, and the experts could not find any indication of structured mechanisms for the recognition of informal prior learning/qualification. The experts therefore recommend implementing a standardised mechanism for the recognition of informal prior learning that is in line with the national regulations to better cater to the diverse educational background of prospective students (**Finding 20**).

Certification at SQU is based on successful course completion, and students confirmed the existence of formal documentation of their degree results. While not all students had detailed knowledge of diploma supplements or specific graduation documents, no issues regarding certification transparency were raised. The diploma supplements issued by SQU for all academic levels formally comply with ESG standards.

As for the PhD programme, SQU is legally entitled to award doctorates. PhD candidates are guided by up to three supervisors, and thesis proposals are formally defended in an internal seminar. There are structured processes for full- and part-time doctoral studies (four and six years respectively) but the experts recommend developing a **model progression plan for PhD students** outlining which steps need to be taken at which time (e.g., scheduling, publication of papers) (**Finding 8c**). Feedback from the PhD student present at the on-site discussion confirmed clarity in the process and satisfaction with supervision.

Conclusion

The criterion is partially fulfilled.

5. Teaching staff / Academic level of supervisory 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]

Doctoral 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 DMC currently employs 13 faculty members (two professors, one associate professor, eight assistant professors, two lecturers), an internship supervisor, an audio-visual production supervisor, and a coordinator. With the increasing intake of PhD students, SQU plans to hire more highly qualified staff. Faculty members are said to be active in research, publishing consultancy work with associated industries, and authoring textbooks, book chapters, and articles in scientific journals.

The SER outlines that most PhD-holding academic staff members teach courses for the Master's programme. Master's theses are said to be supervised by academics with more excellent research experience. Choosing supervisors for PhD students is based on the highest ranks available. The first supervisor usually is of professor or associate professor rank. As for the second supervisors, they may include assistant professor ranks.

The SER outlines SQU's process for staff planning and recruitment which is conducted annually and involves the College Recruitment Committee (CRC) as well as the University Faculty Recruitment Committee (UFRC). As SQU follows the national policy to hire Omanis with exceptional qualifications, it engages in promoting graduates to become assistant professors at SQU. Before becoming assistant professors, the SQU's top graduates are designated demonstrators and sent overseas to complete their Master's and Doctoral degrees. However, SQU is also committed to hiring external staff.

According to the SER, SQU has an evaluation system in place to gather quantitative and qualitative teaching information. SQU further employs a performance evaluation system called Ijada where the performance of employees can be reviewed. Employees who obtain very good or excellent evaluations are given financial compensation by the university. To encourage effective teaching, SQU annually awards the Best Teacher Award. To enhance teaching and learning, SQU implemented an Academic Promotion Regulation in 2015 according to which university teaching and learning competencies should be on par with research competencies. Therefore, staff who approach university teaching and learning in a way that is appropriate for research will be rewarded.

The SER states that SQU offers several opportunities for the academic and didactic development of its teaching staff. The Centre for Information Systems (CIS), the Centre for Staff Development (CSD), and the Centre for Education Technology (CET) provide regular workshops, seminars, and consultancies. Faculty members are also trained to adopt student-centred teaching strategies. Additionally, the CSD hosts courses for professional development. The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning was recently founded to promote, enhance, and share best practices throughout the university. Faculty members can also participate in

workshops, conferences, and training programmes for overseas teaching and learning as well as apply for research grants. Numerous financing organisations are available, such as the Qatar Foundation, UK Research and Innovation, and UNESCO - World Heritage Convention, among others. SQU employees can receive financial assistance to attend conferences and present research. Omani employees receive a sabbatical leave for one year in every six-year working period and the necessary financing to continue their post-graduate studies overseas. All academics are entitled to short annual leave (no more than 28 days). Research projects funded by internal or external funds are open to both students and faculty.

Expert evaluation

SQU has in place a generally sound staffing model with appropriate academic qualifications and institutional support for development.

The academic qualifications of the staff especially those holding PhDs and contributing to research publications, textbook authorship, and consultancy appear to be broadly appropriate to the learning outcomes of both undergraduate and graduate programmes. The responsibilities of supervisors and expectations from PhD candidates are available in the Academic Regulations 2018 mentioned above and the document Postgraduate Theses Writing Guidelines at Sultan Qaboos University 2025. Nevertheless, some more aspects should be outlined more clearly to provide more transparency for students (see **Finding 8c**).

The current faculty appears to be engaged in a reasonable balance of teaching, research, and service. Yet, no detailed breakdown of individual workload allocations is provided to fully assess whether the demands placed on academic staff are sustainable and equitable, especially with the dual pressures of teaching and research productivity. The university does express an interest in retaining top graduates by sponsoring them for postgraduate studies abroad with the intention of promoting them to assistant professorships upon return. While this is commendable, an explicit succession plan or long-term faculty development strategy would provide more assurance of staffing continuity. This is all the more important in the context of the still young PhD programme. Currently, only three professors are available to supervise PhD students. To ensure adequate long-term availability of primary and secondary supervisors, it is important to consider that supervision for a potentially increasing number of PhD candidates has to be guaranteed over a period of four to six years. In addition, no list was made available indicating how supervision responsibilities have been distributed. In general, all three professors are academically qualified, as evidenced by their publications. However, it is unclear to what extent this qualification includes not only theoretical knowledge but also experience in empirical research. It should also be noted that none of the three academics have professional experience in the field of public communication or specifically journalism. While this is not a mandatory requirement for supervising doctoral candidates, it is worth mentioning given that some of the learning outcomes are formulated with reference to current developments in the media landscape. Against this background, it might be beneficial to develop a list of the complete staff profile detailing academic qualifications, teaching load, research involvement, duration of employment, and course responsibilities for each faculty member to gain a better overview of the distribution of supervision responsibilities in the middle run.

Recruitment procedures at SQU are formalised and involve both the College Recruitment Committee (CRC) and the University Faculty Recruitment Committee (UFRC). These processes are documented as annual and are aligned with the university's national development agenda of prioritising Omani candidates. While this enhances national capacity building, the university is also open to hiring international staff when needed. However, the procedure for the qualification and integration of external or guest lecturers into academic programmes is not fully elaborated. It remains unclear how these individuals are oriented to the learning outcomes, academic standards, and pedagogical expectations of the university. SQU should therefore establish a reliable and transparent procedure for the integration of external guest lecturers to ensure their academic

eligibility (**Finding 21**). This also applies to professors from other universities who, according to the expert panel, might be beneficial as co-supervisors for theses. As for guest lecturers, it might also be beneficial to increase the contribution of guest lectures in the courses and to include more lecturers with a practical background to close the gap between theory and labour market, especially for the Bachelor's programme.

The university demonstrates a strong commitment to academic development and staff training in teaching and learning, with multiple centres such as the Centre for Staff Development (CSD) and the Centre for Education Technology (CET) offering regular workshops, professional development, and funding for research and conference participation. The expert panel commends these services to ensure the quality of teaching and research and encourages SQU to maintain these efforts to keep up with the constantly changing environment of the Mass Communication field. This is particularly important with regard to new trends and technologies that are relevant for the field such as AI, among others, and could also include providing funding for external training opportunities for teaching staff if needed.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

6. Learning resources and student support / Support and research environment

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]

Doctoral degree

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

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

[ESG 1.6]

Description

Learning Resources

The SER states that SQU offers access to printed and digital library resources, general and specialised computer labs, study halls and other facilities. The main library at SQU is said to be the most extensive library in Oman in terms of space, collection, and number of users with access to a total of 505,693 books, 45,121 electronic journals, and 59 databases. The library is committed to maintaining international standards by regularly updating collections, policies, and services to enhance user satisfaction and research outcomes. The Deanship of Admission and Registration (A&R) manage the centralised process of allocating classrooms for lectures in the DMC. Classrooms are equipped with white boards, desktop computers, speakers, and LCD projectors. Additionally, the CASS provides four lecture halls equipped with whiteboards, LCD projectors, and sound systems. Each hall accommodates over 120 students. Students also have access to multiple computer labs across its various buildings. Each lab has 30 desktop computers, LCD projectors, and printers, offering students tools for online research, access to digital resources (including the library database), and assignment printing. Due to the specialised equipment designed for specific programmes, these labs are open to all students except those requiring special permits. The college building's ground floor houses faculty offices, where students can seek guidance and assistance. At the beginning of each semester, faculty members post their

teaching schedules and office hours on designated boards outside their offices. To accommodate students with disabilities, ramps, elevators, adaptive workstations as well as assistive technologies such as screen readers, and transcription services are provided.

Research projects funded by internal or external funds are said to be open to students and faculty. To assist with final-year undergraduate projects, the Ministry for Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation created the Faculty-Mentored Undergraduate Research Award Programme (FURAP) fellowships. SQU also offers financial support for undergraduate students who want to attend domestic or international conferences.

In addition to the facilities used by Bachelor's students, Master's students can use the DMC seminar room. PhD students can also use a room that is dedicated to them with access to a desk for each student as well as other facilities such as a kitchen, a printer, and internet.

Student Support Services

The SER states that academic advice is a fundamental component of SQU's study programmes. To give students the knowledge and direction they need to properly pursue their academic goals and studies, SQU offers an orientation programme which is supposed to help students adapt to university life. During the orientation programme, newly enrolled students are assigned to an academic advisor at department level. There are weekly designated time slots available for students to seek support from their advisor in all matters related to academic and non-academic matters. A Career Guidance Centre is available as well. SQU's Student Counselling Centre provides several support and counselling services such as individual and group therapy, career counselling, and various workshops. The Student Services Centre offers various services and facilities for students such as cultural and educational services and entertainment. The Academic Support Unit for Students with Disabilities focuses on providing academic support to students with disabilities at the university level. Students with children, urgent situations, health issues, or other significant personal commitments can request flexible class schedules or extensions for assignments. International students receive support through the orientation programme which is said to be tailored to their needs and introduce them to local academic environment and culture. Language support services are also available for non-Arabic-speaking students.

SQU further offers support through the Religious Guidance and Counselling Department for all students. Students can also engage in a variety of sports and recreational activities. In addition, SQU offers medical services free of charge for students, nutrition services, and both internal and external housing for students.

To create an inclusive and respectful academic environment, SQU has implemented policies on intolerance and discrimination.

Expert evaluation

The facilities at SQU are modern, well-maintained and easily accessible for students. They thus effectively support the Mass Communication programmes. The campus provides up-to-date resources and infrastructure, including classrooms, extensive libraries, and specific laboratories tailored to the needs of each faculty. These facilities not only ensure that students have access to the physical tools they need but also reflect SQU's commitment to delivering a comprehensive academic environment.

SQU provides a broad range of learning resources and support structures that are well perceived by students. According to the discussions on site, students expressed satisfaction with the general availability of teaching staff. Faculty members are approachable, often even without prior appointments, and provide at least six hours of consultation per week. Communication also takes place via SIS, Moodle, email, and WhatsApp, allowing for timely and flexible support. Everyday student issues and problems are discussed openly and with a focus on solutions.

Module descriptions are accessible to students from the beginning of their studies through digital platforms. Students reported being informed about assessments at the beginning of the semester, and assessment methods follow a scheme (e.g., three components per course), though details may vary across lecturers. Policies and procedures for the inclusion of students with special needs are clear and comprehensive. A dedicated support centre is in place, and they are granted accommodations such as extra time for sitting exams. Students are allowed to defer exams in certain cases, with a dedicated committee handling timetables and individual requests. These practices reflect an inclusive approach.

Appropriate support for internships is in place. A formal internship course exists (8 weeks, 4 credit hours) and is based on agreements with companies such as Oman TV and Oman Radio. Internships are evaluated both by an academic and a workplace supervisor. However, students and labour market representatives indicated that the current allocation process is not always transparent enough regarding the selection of candidates. The experts support this and suggest making the selection of candidates for internships more transparent.

SQU provides some support for internationalisation through short training programmes abroad and incentives for publications and research. However, students indicated that offers for full-semester exchanges are still rare and not always well-communicated. Similarly, while some research support and conference participation are available (especially at PhD level), Master's students reported limited access to such opportunities or were not aware of them. As especially conferences are an important tool for international visibility, SQU should establish a plan to extend support for international exposure of their students and communicate existing options more efficiently (**Finding 22**).

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

7. Information / Public 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]

Doctoral 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

The SER outlines that SQU and DMC leverage several communication channels to disseminate information to students and stakeholders. The University's and College's official websites are the main repositories for this information, with Arabic and English being the primary languages. The university's official website offers information and applications pertaining to several faculties such as the procedural framework for student admissions, applicable to both domestic and international candidates. The DMC website is said to contain information on the study programmes including the organisational structure of the faculty, a comprehensive directory of faculty members and staff, a listing of all facilities at the faculty level, general study guides, an academic calendar, conferences, and academic publications associated with the faculty, along with details about student organisations and alumni associations. In addition, SQU employs a range of online applications to facilitate communication with students and faculty members and to assist faculty in managing administrative matters such as Pure Expert, a platform for faculty members to document their research endeavours and community

service activities. To enhance the visibility of its academic programmes to a broader audience, the DMC collaborates with Omani online and print media to disseminate information regarding its current educational and scientific initiatives.

Expert evaluation

SQU and the Department of Mass Communication use several communication channels – including bilingual websites and official emails – to provide impartial and up-to-date information on programme structures, admission procedures, qualifications, and research activities for external audiences and stakeholders. This information is publicly available and relevant to prospective students, employers, and institutional partners. Internal quality assurance structures help ensure that the published information remains accurate and regularly updated.

As for enrolled students, they receive timely and structured information through platforms such as Moodle, Pure Expert, and WhatsApp groups, as well as official university emails. Course descriptions, ILOs, and assessment methods are accessible from the beginning of each semester. Students can also participate in regular feedback mechanisms – such as surveys and student committees – that inform course and programme adjustments.

However, while stakeholder input – particularly from the labour market – is gathered through advisory boards and consultations, the feedback loop is not fully closed. There is limited evidence that stakeholders are consistently informed about how their feedback is used or whether it leads to programme changes, reducing transparency and impact (see **Finding 11**).

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

V. Recommendation of the panel of experts

The panel of experts recommends accrediting the study programmes “**Mass Communication**” (Bachelor of Arts), “**Mass Communication**” (Master of Arts), and “**Mass Communication**” (PhD) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University** with conditions.

Commendation

The three programmes of Mass Communication at SQU are overall well-structured and able to provide graduates with the appropriate knowledge and skills for the respective academic level. Quality assurance policies and processes are generally thorough and functional. SQU offers extensive learning resources and student support services which ensure that students have both the physical resources and personal support they need to succeed in their studies. This also applies to policies and procedures for students with special needs which displays SQU’s commitment to establishing an inclusive atmosphere on campus. Both lecturers and students emphasised the positive relationship they share. Faculty and staff are very engaged in the programmes and the international character of the teaching staff with their diverse expertise and academic background is a positive influence on the programmes. The facilities and library resources at SQU are very modern and well-equipped, supporting the academic progression of the students.

Findings

1. **BA**: SQU must develop and publish detailed programme-level ILOs that are aligned with national and international qualification frameworks and mapped clearly to the curriculum.
2. The **information on the programmes** that are available to students must be revised.
 - a. **BA & MA**: SQU must publish a comprehensive module handbook, ideally including course descriptions, learning objectives, assessment methods, and pre/co-requisites.
 - b. **BA & MA**: SQU must clearly indicate the complete workload expectations for each course and transparently outline credit allocation in the module handbook.
 - c. **BA & MA**: A table should be made available outlining the alignment of the national credit system with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).
 - d. **BA**: The purpose and the ILOs of internships must be clarified and standardised in the documents.
3. **BA & MA**: The experts recommend enhancing **interdisciplinary components**, also in the international context, by integrating topics like AI in media, communication ethics, media entrepreneurship, and social impact.
4. SQU must establish and document reliable and transparent processes for collecting and **publishing evidence from graduate surveys and labour market feedback** to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and its relevance to employment.
5. **MA**: A **model study plan** should be developed and made publicly available.
6. **MA**: The **function and weight of the final thesis** should be clarified and transparent information on supervision, assessment rubrics, and expected learning outcomes should be provided.
7. **MA & PhD**: It is recommended to monitor which areas of expertise (university or non-university context) external examiners come from.

8. SQU should revise the **documents provided to PhD students to improve transparency**:
 - a. SQU should describe the **graduate profile** of the PhD programme and make it publicly available to all stakeholders.
 - b. SQU must revise its current **regulations on PhD admission and progression** to make them more comprehensive.
 - c. It is recommended to develop a **model progression plan for PhD students** outlining which steps need to be taken at which time (e.g., scheduling, publication of papers).
9. **PhD**: SQU should consider covering various postgraduate needs by **establishing a postgraduate school/forum** which offers courses that prepare graduates for their future jobs in terms of soft skills, computational skills, methodological skills, interdisciplinary skills, foreign language skills, and other supplementary requirements.
10. The experts recommend that the **collected data on the student body** be transparently documented by SQU on a central level and made available to those responsible for the study programme.
11. SQU should put mechanisms in place to ensure that the **feedback loops in QA**, especially for student course evaluations, are closed.
12. The experts recommend adopting and implementing a **clear teaching and learning strategy** across all levels of the Mass Communication programmes, emphasising student-centred, active, and inclusive pedagogies.
13. SQU should **map teaching methods explicitly to ILOs**, ensuring that each course and module uses teaching strategies appropriate to the competencies being developed.
14. SQU must integrate **practical components** in its teaching, especially at the postgraduate level, through workshops, collaborative projects, guest lectures, and digital media labs.
15. SQU should **diversify assessment formats** to better evaluate critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and application of knowledge.
16. SQU should revise the published **assessment and examination regulations** to make them more transparent and comprehensive, especially for students.
17. **PhD**: The maximum time limit for examiners to assess the thesis via the Thesis Report Form must be specified.
18. SQU must make the **process of student appeals** visible on departmental and university portals.
19. A standardised system for the **conversion of ECTS** must be implemented at SQU to promote student mobility.
20. **A standardised mechanism for the recognition of informal prior learning** should be implemented in line with the national regulations to better cater to the diverse educational background of prospective students.
21. SQU should establish a reliable and transparent procedure for the integration of external **guest lecturers** to ensure their academic eligibility.
22. SQU should establish a **plan to extend support for international exposure** of their students and communicate existing options more efficiently.