

## Decision of the Standing Commission of AQAS

On the bachelor programme:

### **Mass Communication and Media**

#### **(Bachelor of Mass Communication and Media)**

with the specializations:

- Journalism
- Advertising
- Public Relations

offered by the **Al-Ain University of Science and Technology**, United Arab Emirates

1. The study programme “**Mass Communication and Media**” (Bachelor of Mass Communication and Media) with the specializations in Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations offered by **Al-Ain University of Science and Technology** in the United Arab Emirates is accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Programme Accreditation.

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

2. The accreditation is **conditional**.
3. The conditions have to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions has to be documented and reported to AQAS no later than **31 March 2020**.
4. The accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **30 September 2025**.

#### **Conditions:**

1. More practical skills have to be included in the curriculum. Specifically:
  - a. For the Journalism specialization: Practical courses e.g. “Story telling”, “Online Production” or “Design programmes” have to be implemented to foster the creativity of the students.
  - b. For the Public Relations specialization: Practical courses focussing on the three perspectives of public relations (communication strategies, content creation and media production) have to be implemented.
  - c. For the Advertising specialization: The practical content of “TV and Radio Advertising”, “Print Advertising” and “Electronic Advertising” has to be increased in order to fulfil the holistic approach of the specialization.

2. The anticipated student workload per course (including time for self-study, examination and the course itself) needs to be defined.

The conditions were fulfilled on time.  
The Standing Commission confirms this with its decision of 29 May 2020.

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

1. AAU should ensure that state-of-the-art field-specific technical equipment is available for students in order to train their practical skills.
2. The workload of students should be evaluated.
3. The department should pay special attention to the didactical order of courses, so that more specialised courses build on competences gained beforehand in more general courses.
4. In the future development of the curriculum, the department should focus on topics such as "Social Media" or "Big Data". Especially social media content should be tackled from two sides (strategic vision and tools of social media) to connect theory and practice.
5. When filling future vacancies, AAU should ensure that skills specific to journalism and advertising are represented adequately in its staff portfolio.
6. Courses strengthening the English proficiency of students should be fostered in the curriculum to create a level of specific terminologies within the discipline.
7. The methods of interdisciplinary group work should be further developed within the classes.
8. More reflection- and skill-oriented project-based examinations should be considered in practical courses.
9. To further strengthen the independence of the learner and provide an advanced source of information for students, AAU should consider including skills and competences within the descriptions in the student handbook.

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



## Experts' Report

on the Bachelor degree programme:

### Mass Communication and Media

#### (Bachelor of Mass Communication and Media)

with the specializations:

- Journalism
- Advertising
- Public Relations

offered by the **Al-Ain University of Science and Technology**, United Arab Emirates

Visit to the University: 21 to 24 January 2019

#### Panel of Experts:

<b>Prof. Dr. Lars Rademacher</b>	University of Applied Sciences Darmstadt, Department of Public Relations, Germany
<b>Ass. Prof. Dr. Sama'a Alawi Al Hashimi</b>	Bahrain University, Department of Communication, Tourism and Fine Arts; Multimedia and Graphic Design, Bahrain
<b>Prof. Dr. Matthias Degen</b>	Westfälische Hochschule, University of Applied Sciences, Institute for Journalism and Public Relations, Germany
<b>Eric Karstens</b>	Media Consultant, Germany (representative from the labour market)
<b>Christopher Pridat</b>	student of Social Sciences, University of Erfurt, Germany (student representative)
<b>Coordinator:</b> Ronny Heintze / Patrick Heinzer	AQAS e.V., Cologne, Germany

## **Preamble**

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

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

## **I. Accreditation procedure**

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This report results from the external review of the Bachelor programme in Mass Communication and Media (with three specializations in Journalism, Advertising, Public Relations) offered by Al-Ain University of Science and Technology (AAU) / United Arab Emirates.

### **Criteria**

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

### **Approach and methodology**

#### *The initialisation*

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

The Al-Ain University of Science and Technology produced a Self Evaluation Report (SER). In June 2018, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation of the study programme and an appendix.

The appendix included e.g.:

- Overview over statistical data of the student body (e.g. number of applications, beginners, students, graduates, student drop outs).
- CVs of the teaching staff

- Information on student services
- Core information on the main library
- Undergraduate/graduate academic regulations

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility and transparency. The final version of the SER was handed in November 2018.

The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Accreditation Commission on August 2018.

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

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

The Accreditation Commission nominated in November 2018 the before mentioned expert panel. AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and the Al-Ain University of Science and Technology did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

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

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

#### *The site visit*

After a review of the Self Evaluation Report, a site visit to the University took place from 21-23 January 2019. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. the management of the HEI, the programme management, teaching and other staff, as well as students and graduates, in separate discussions and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded by the presentation of the preliminary findings of the group of experts to the Al-Ain University of Science and Technology's representatives.

#### *The report writing*

After the site visit had taken place, the expert group drafted the following report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS criteria for the programme accreditation. The report included a recommendation to the Accreditation Commission. The report was sent to the Al-Ain University of Science and Technology for comments.

#### *The decision*

The report, together with the comments of the department, forms the basis for the AQAS Accreditation Commission to make a decision regarding the accreditation of the programme. Based on these two documents, on 27/28 May 2019 the Accreditation Commission took its decision on the accreditation. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

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

## **II. General Information on the University**

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Al-Ain University of Science and Technology (AAU) is a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates licenced by the Ministry of Education – Higher Education Affairs. The institution was established in 2005 and is located on two campuses, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. The university outlines as its academic goal to become one of the leading centres of excellence which responds to market needs and prepares graduates who possess the scientific and technological competencies required for their careers. The university claims an international profile by offering programmes in English, by inviting international students and academic staff and participating in exchange programmes.

Al-Ain University comprises six faculties/colleges: Engineering, Pharmacy, Law, Education, Business and Communication and Media. The faculties currently offer 19 undergraduate and eight postgraduate degree programmes. The Bachelor programme to be accredited is the only offer of the College of Communication and Mass Media, which has only recently been established (2014/15). The college aims at achieving leadership in journalism, Public Relations (PR) and advertising studies by employing the latest teaching and research methods. The college currently hosts 518 students.

The college is governed by a dean; leadership, faculty and students participate in Department and College Councils.

## **III. Assessment of the study programme**

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### **1. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance**

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

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

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

Al-Ain University of Science and Technology has defined its vision and mission in respective statements. All academic programmes and administrative units are supposed to develop outcomes assessment plans in line with the overall mission (based on a common model) which include objectives and assessment tools. An Institutional Effectiveness Plan is described by the University to constitute a roadmap which guides continuous improvement, and measures how well the institution pursues its goals. Assessment results are said to provide empirical support for decisions regarding the allocation of resources and operational and long-range planning. Assessment results at programme level have to be presented annually.

The quality assurance system of the university is implemented by several units, such as University Quality Committees on e.g. academic affairs, administrative affairs or programme quality, as well as the Quality Assurance & Institutional Research Centre (QAIRC). QAIRC is directly linked to the president; it supports programmes and units in collecting, analysing and presenting data from on-going assessments.

In particular, assessment measures used at the college as listed in the SER cover, for example, student evaluation of courses and instructors, course assessment by a course coordinator as well as assessment of course learning objectives by faculty and students; these measures are said to

be applied every semester. Every year, according to the information provided by the university, exit surveys covering issues such as facilities, study programme, advising and transferable skills will be conducted.

Students are involved in quality assurance by their representation in Department and College Councils. Furthermore, the university outlines that the dean and the head of department meet with students several times every academic year to collect feedback.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The Al-Ain University of Science and Technology has a two-level approach regarding the quality management of the study programmes, which consists of a quality management at university level and one at the department level. The university's overall quality assurance system is coordinated by the Quality Assurance and Institutional Research Centre (QAIRC), and results are constantly used to detect areas for improvement. This also affects budgetary decisions, such as additional equipment acquisition. On department level, the measures to collect quality assurance data are fit for purpose and well established. The responsibilities between the two quality assurance units are dovetailed and the decisions drawn from the results aim clearly for the enhancement of the study programme.

In line with the university's objectives and policies, the department performs regular outcome assessments. Students are requested to express in surveys their general satisfaction every semester and after graduation. They also are asked to evaluate each course and instructor by the end of the semester. The department's leadership assesses students' collective grades, and reviews the professional performance of teaching staff. On top of this, the department surveys alumni as well as potential and actual employers of graduates, thus adding an external perspective to the quality management process. Potential findings are fed into an institutional effectiveness plan, which is coordinated by the QAIRC. Based on the discussion rounds and the self-evaluation report, the expert panel concluded that the quality assurance policies and processes are set out comprehensively, which reflects the overall commitment on university and department level towards quality assurance. During the site visit at both campuses in Al Ain and Abu Dhabi, the expert panel found clear evidence that the university and department stringently adhere to the plans and processes described in the SER. In accordance with the university's policy, both campuses have the same structure regarding quality assurance. Although the processes may perhaps at first glance appear overly complex, it is in fact commensurate with the variety of sources for quality management data and the places (individual courses, the programme as a whole, facilities, teaching methods, etc.) where quality-related findings must be considered. The only systematic aspect missing from evaluations is the student workload per course – a parameter that is quite relevant for how students organise their semesters and also may have a bearing on the relative weight of the individual grades earned by the time of graduation (**Finding 1**).

Students as well as recent graduates reported that their suggestions were heard and taken seriously, and that they appreciated the "open doors policy" in place, meaning that they felt free to approach their instructors, the management of the study programme, and even the president of the university at any time with constructive criticism. In fact, students gave multiple examples of improvements, most pronounced in terms of the balance between theory and practice in individual courses on the one hand, and the balance between academic education and their exposure to the practice field on the other. Overall, they confirmed that the quality of the entire programme had substantially increased in the time since its inception.

Similarly, the representatives of the government and private sector employers stated that Al-Ain University had become a staple of media education in the United Arab Emirates in recent years and was responding well to rising demand in the media labour market. They expressed co-ownership in the quality management processes and confirmed that their feedback was heard by

the university, even as they acknowledged that some of their demands might take some time to implement (e.g. foreign language skills, social media specialisation).

Given that the programme is still relatively young, the number of alumni in media jobs still remains small, which means that the university could incorporate lessons learned from their careers only to a limited extent yet. However, the expert panel did meet several graduates who had started new jobs or even companies and remained closely connected to the department staff, which indicates that there is a constant exchange with the labour market. Moreover, at the Abu Dhabi campus, a large proportion of students engage in extra-occupational, part-time studies parallel to their jobs, which also means that there are rather close ties between academia and practice by default.

The experts positively recognize that next to internship opportunities, the university's community outreach programmes were also highlighted as an effective way to strengthen relations between Al-Ain University and society in the UAE, and to keep closely in touch with emerging society and labour market demands. This approach is highly appreciated by the panel of experts.

The university as well as department leadership and faculty staff likewise demonstrated their commitment to the quality assurance policy and process. For instance, they produced amended and updated course descriptions in response to feedback collected in- and outside the university, and were keen on incorporating recommendations delivered by the expert panel.

### **Conclusion**

Globally, it was evident that the study programme had already experienced a substantial quality development since its inception, clearly drawing on experiences gained and feedback received, and implementing the majority of lessons learned post-haste. Areas lagging behind, such as structural amendments to the programme and the fully comprehensive availability of specialised teaching staff (e.g., in advertising), are primarily due to legal and hiring limitations, but are expected to be addressed as soon as possible. Therefore, this criterion is fulfilled.

## **2. Quality of the Curriculum**

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

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

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

### Study programme objectives

According to the university, the programme has been designed to educate professional journalists, PR and advertising professional practitioners and researchers. Students will receive training in journalism practice, digital design, new technologies, research and preparation for advanced studies and educational careers. Since 2015, a College Consultative Council has been advising the college in refining the programme so that it serves local and regional needs as well as to keep it competitive.

Knowledge to be conveyed in the programme covers basic theories and concepts for practicing journalism; among the skills to be acquired by students and presented by the university are marketing communication, news gathering, editing and designing, planning media campaigns and



advertising as well as research skills. The theoretical education is supposed to be connected to field work.

Courses are allocated into basic, intermediate and advanced. Basic courses cover, for example, introductions to PR, Advertising, Journalism, Multimedia as well as Media Ethics & Legislation. The basic courses are prerequisite for intermediate courses, such as PR Management, Data Journalism, Electronic Advertising or Direct Marketing. Advance courses convey specialized content to enhance students' level, e.g. PR Case Studies or Graduation Project.

The programme offers three specialisms: Journalism, Advertising and PR. The language of instruction is Arabic with a few courses offered in English. According to the university, it corresponds to the respective level of the Emirates Qualification Framework.

The presented study plan includes a total of 123 credit hours, of which 18 relate to elective courses which offer students the opportunity to focus on their special interests. 105 credit hours must be taken in compulsory courses relating to Journalism, Advertising and PR. Ethical guidance will be provided, for example, in courses on Media Law and Ethics. Furthermore, courses cover cross-subject and general topics such as Computer Skills, Scientific Research Methods or Islamic Culture.

The curriculum is supposed to place emphasis on student engagement and tangible learning experiences. An internship is compulsory. Students are supported in finding internships as a means to approach the labour market. Visiting lectures shall help students understand the needs of the market.

The head of department is responsible for the coordination of the programme. As outlined in the SER, the dean and his/her deputy ensure that teaching is similar at both campuses. Coordinators for each course have also been assigned. Department and College Councils meet every month. A course's content as well as its coordination is supported by a Study Plan Committee of the college.

A course handbook is provided for students; it is updated by the College Council.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The general approach to address the field of mass communication and media with three different specifications is highly welcomed by the labour market and corresponds to the developments in other media industries. The so-called T-shaped structure with broad basics and specifications that are designed to meet the industries' needs as well as to connect to relevant research in the field is comprehensible. The experts have clearly seen that the study programme is developing very dynamically to meet the expectations of the labour market better and to produce well-trained graduates. The synchronisation between the two campuses is clearly visible and there is no difference in terms of content between the two sites. Nonetheless, certain points have to be addressed in order to improve the study programme.

The learning outcomes aim to leave the students in a state of high employability, giving them the theories of practising mass communication within the three specializations offered by the university. In order to reach this goal of high employability, the expert panel detected a certain omission regarding practical skills of media. During the discussion rounds it became clear that the university has opted for a more theoretical approach towards mass communication. Practical contents are primarily being taught through theory. Although at the moment the students gain practical knowledge by applying theory on a more individual, but high level, the labour market clearly expressed that a more balanced level of knowledge with a sound theoretical background but also with a certain level of practical experience is needed at the moment in the country and in the region. In consequence, the curriculum of the programme has to include a stronger focus on practi-

cal skills of media to fulfil the needs of the labour market and to establish a holistic approach within the three specializations (**Finding 2**).

All three specializations require in-depth knowledge of methodology and technology, but of course they differ in its contents. All courses are aligned with a number of credits (three credits are given for each module). At this time, the journalism specialization courses are mainly focused on the analysis of practical developments and media trends. Although being compulsory, it is necessary to incorporate changes to the journalism curriculum in order further to round out and improve the students' practical skills. The feedback from the labour market indicates that there is a demand for graduates who are able to work with design programmes, are familiar with online and video productions or are able to master storytelling skills. The aim of Al-Ain University has to be to train practically skilled, technically fine journalists with a sound theoretical background. To achieve this, the university has to implement specific journalistic practical courses like "Story telling", "Online Productions" or "Design programmes", which foster creativity of students (**Finding 2a**).

On a positive note, the public relations specialization also represents a broad theoretical overview of the field. To foster the required practical approach towards public relation, the panel of experts concludes it is necessary to include the three perspectives of public relations: communication strategies (including conceptional, strategical and campaigning contents), content creation (with a focus on writing content, audio-visual content, web content and content creation) and media production (including editorial and web design, video production and editing). All three perspectives could be differentiated into compulsory and/or elective courses to give a certain flexibility to the students' interests (**Finding 2b**).

The advertising specialization curriculum covers also the theoretical approach in a very good and consistent manner. Nonetheless, it would be good if a practical approach will be integrated to produce not only graduates who are theoretically well prepared, but who are also able to translate their broad knowledge into practice. Although some courses such as "TV and radio advertising" include some weeks of practical content, it is needed to foster the programme with practical knowledge of courses e.g. "TV and radio advertising", "Printed advertising" and "Electronic advertising" (**Finding 2c**).

The overall aim of all three specializations is to give an overview on each topic (journalism, public relations and advertising). In addition to the mentioned omission of practical courses, a certain balance of specialised courses is currently missing within the curriculum and the three specializations. To create a common theme in the composition of the specializations, it would be reasonable to start with foundation courses to specify it at a later stage with courses that deepen the imparted contents. A good example for this is that students in the journalism specialization have "Investigative Journalism" without knowing much about the fundamentals of research in journalism. Thus, the department should make sure that specific courses are previously covered in introductory courses to give a solid ground to start from (**Finding 3**).

Having said that the study programme is currently trying to adapt to current trends in the field of mass communication, further points have to be addressed by the university to enhance the quality of the study programme. The general compulsory curriculum has been developed to give an overview of each possible specialization. Since Social Media and Big data will be more important in the future, the department may focus on these topics when further developing and updating the curriculum. In the last ten years issues like big data analysis and communication metrics have become essential in Advertising, PR and Journalism. The experts strongly advise to rethink the role of data-related analysis throughout the curriculum and consider integrating specific courses already on the compulsory course level. Especially the Social Media content should be tackled from two sides (strategic vision and tools of social media) to connect theory and practice. On the long run it might also be worth considering to establish a new specialization focusing on social

media because this will be the high demand from the labour market in the upcoming years (**Finding 4**).

Although the study programme is an Arabic programme producing graduates from the Arab regions, the media business in general has to be seen as a connecting point across the globe. Inferring from the statements coming from the labour market, but also from graduates and current students the experts learned that language proficiency in English is crucial for such a study programme even for graduates who will be employed within the Arab countries. Within mass communication English serves as a global language, creating stronger relationships with clients, facilitating the communication between the cultures and as an embracing element of globalisation. At the moment the department has started to implement some courses in English. The experts positively recognize that the department is not only aware of this trend, but has also started to slowly increase the number of courses taught in English. Continuing this trend, courses strengthening the English proficiency of students should be fostered in the curriculum to create a level of specific terminologies within the discipline (**Finding 5**).

#### **Conclusion:**

The panel of experts commends the strong motivation to create a unique study programme for the region and confirms the high relevance for the Arab labour market and beyond, with particular recognition of the good and solid theoretical foundation for each specialization. The stronger inclusion of practical competencies in the curriculum will help the department to produce graduates with a more holistic knowledge of mass communication. Therefore, this criterion is partly fulfilled.

### **3. Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students**

The delivery of material encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.  
Students are assessed using accessible criteria, regulations, and procedures, which are made readily available to all participants and which are applied consistently.  
Assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

#### Learning, Teaching

As described by the university, teaching methods mainly cover lectures. Work-based learning is used in various courses in the form of brainstorming, classroom exercise, working groups or the use of electronic tools. Field training is provided via the internship, workshops and site visits to help students understand the requirements of the labour market.

#### Assessment

Exams are described to be the most common form of assessment. The college applies three types of exams: quiz, mid and final exams, which can be realized online or in printed form. Not all courses require an exam but may be assessed by presentations, problem-solving activities or projects.

Quizzes and midterm exam dates are set by instructors in cooperation with students to avoid overlaps. Exam weeks are defined and will be published in the academic calendar. The college is responsible for the exam organisation; regulations are laid down in a set of policies and procedures.

The Dean of Student Affairs provides assistance and possibilities to compensate for students with disabilities. According to the self-evaluation report the Al-Ain university has clearly defined as-

assessment regulations regarding their assessment methods including the mid and final exam and the final project. These regulations shall define the grading proportion of practical and theoretical courses.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

Generally, the experts appreciate the appropriate mix of different learning and teaching methods such as courses and lectures. Within lectures, learners benefit from the fact that students come from the three different specializations incorporating their different backgrounds while laying common foundations. The diversity helps them to get to know an interdisciplinary approach. In addition, some of the courses include presentations as parts of the assessment scheme. This enables students to strengthen their communication skills. Based on the discussions held during the site visit, the experts conclude that the method of interdisciplinary group works could be further developed within the classes. By doing so, the skills needed in the mass communication labour market will be strengthened (**Finding 6**).

Most of the courses have quizzes, mid and final terms as examination types. These quizzes are carried out during the semester, whereas the mid and final terms are mostly on a written basis. For internships the assessment scheme comprises a report, a presentation and an exam with standardized questions about their internship. This last exam is done on-line. The experts are of the opinion that the variety of examination methods is beneficial for the students so they can foster their knowledge. However, for courses such as "TV and radio advertising", which can also be expected to cover practical skills, this should also be reflected in the type of examination. In those cases, the panel of experts highly suggests changing the examination type to a more project-based examination (**Finding 7**). In the future development it might be considered that the final exam will be assessed by a jury, some of which may come from the labour market. By doing so, the students would get a realistic feedback from the labour market and it would allow to transfer their knowledge to situations outside the university context.

The Al-Ain University disposes of a well-established system regarding their academic regulations. Students are informed about the procedures and mechanisms as a part of the student handbook. The academic regulations adequately cover grading schemes, possible re-sit exams and an academic warning system. The Al-Ain University uses a grading scheme which enables a comparison between grading letters, percentages and grading point average (GPA) points and makes it easily possible to calculate the average grading points of students. Students failing through an exam will be allowed to re-sit the exam (academic summer session) if the approval of the dean has been stated. Regarding the final exam, students who had failed the exam will have to retake the course in the following year. A positive instrument to protect students is the mechanism that students dropping under a certain GPA will not be able to register for more than 15 credit points in the following semester to make sure that the workload is manageable for the student. In case the low performance continues, students will receive a second warning with the consequence that the workload of students will be lowered again (twelve CP). Students who continue to fail will be dismissed from the university, or students are advised to change their study programme. The experts commend AAU for this student-centred practice.

The teaching methods and all assessment regulations are transparently described in the student handbook and they are applied equally at the two campuses. By providing a general student handbook, all students are familiar with the requirements for the examinations and possible procedures.

### **Conclusion:**

The University has set up a clear structure and transparent rules regarding the assessment regulations. In the future development of the programme a further amplification of the teaching methods with more project-based examinations and group work experiences will contribute to an even greater success in the labour market. This criterion is fulfilled.

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

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

Requirements for admission to programmes at AAU are a secondary school certificate with a grade average of no less than 60 % (in case this requirement is not met, applicants may hand in a foundation year certificate), a proof of English language proficiency (such as TOEFL ITP) and any additional admission requirements of the college, if applicable.

So far, the college has enrolled 1.071 students. According to the statistics outlined in the self-evaluation report that most of the students are enrolled in the PR specialization.

According to the self-evaluation report, the Al-Ain university has procedures to recognize prior learning of students. This includes students coming from other departments within the Al-Ain university and students coming from other universities in UAE. All Curricular elements are assigned credit hours, among them the internship.

Upon graduation students receive a certificate attesting their grades and academic records.

##### **Experts' Evaluation**

The University has a clear structure regarding the admission procedures for prospective students. The Registrar's office is the point of contact for such students and will help them in case any questions might be unanswered. The University offers additionally a toll-free telephone hotline for students who ask for guidance. Students who want to apply for undergraduate programmes at Al-Ain University can find detailed information on the university's homepage. This information includes general entry requirements for undergraduates, required documents and specifications regarding the English proficiency. Students who fulfil the requirements for the programme (Technical certificate from the UAE or its equivalent approved by the UAE Ministry with minimum average of 65%) are admitted to the programme. The Al-Ain University does not have any additional selection procedure in place. These requirements apply equally to both campuses for the study programmes.

Since the establishment of the department in 2015, the University keeps track of the different cohorts admitted each year to the both campuses. Apart from the first year where the number of admitted students varied, both campuses are levelled in terms of students. At the moment of the site visit, circa 521 students are enrolled in the department (264 at Al-Ain campus and 257 at Abu Dhabi campus). Additionally, the University keeps track of the male-female ratio and the origin of the student bodies.

Procedures for the recognition of courses from other departments or other universities are in place and students are informed about it. Students have to hand in a course equivalency application to the admission unit of the university. The University has clearly defined conditions under which circumstances courses can be recognized.

The Al-Ain university approaches internationalization from an internal and external perspective. Internally, it is mentionable that the teaching staff mostly comes from different countries and contributes through this into an international perspective on mass communication at the University. Externally, the University supports student's mobility by providing workshops together with the Arab Universities Association in order to create awareness regarding academic exchange.

Students receive upon completion of the study programme a diploma supplement including a transcript of records and the degree certificate. The certificate and the diploma supplement also indicate the specialization the students have chosen.

**Conclusion:**

Students of the Al-Ain University benefit from the well-established system and regulations of the university. All necessary information can be found on the homepage of the university and are transparently applied at both campuses. The efforts to internationalize the university are clearly visible and the Al-Ain University can draw on the network of other Arab universities to foster the exchange of students. The certification processes are detailed and comparable with international standards. Thus, this criterion is fulfilled.

**5. Teaching Staff**

The composition (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) of the staff is appropriate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.  
Staff involved with teaching is qualified and competent to do so.  
Transparent procedures are in place for the recruitment and development of the staff.

As outlined in the SER, the College of Communication and Media currently employs 13 faculty members, eleven assistant professors and two instructors; 2/3 of faculty are full-time. Additionally, administrative staff include four lab assistants and secretaries.

Full-time teaching staff is required to teach 12 contact hours per week in the semester. Further workload is specified according to office hours, research, administrative duties and the preparation of instructional material.

Al-Ain University applies a faculty recruitment procedure and it aims as hiring staff with an excellent academic record, research potential and effective teaching performances.

The university provides an annual budget for research and the professional development of its faculty members. Grants may be provided for research projects, conferences, scientific meetings or workshops. A Unit of Professional Development drafts an annual schedule of further offers.

**Experts' Evaluation**

The diverse composition of staff coming from various nationalities fits well together and enriches the programme. This also reflects a successful international, multicultural learning and working environment. Based on the discussions during the site visit, it became evident that the teachers are very approachable for students. This helps to support students on a more informal level. During the site visit, it became evident to the panel of experts that the department of mass communication at the Al-Ain University has keen and motivated teachers at both campuses. Full-time teaching staff are expected to impart in total twelve hours each semester, which is the equivalent of four courses. Additional administrative positions might reduce the workload of teachers. Especially the high number of Ph.D. holders is remarkable. The university management appropriately supports the teaching staff financially to attend international conferences and to carry out research. Additionally, there are plans to invite keynote speakers from other well-known universities to create links to international researchers.

In general, there is an active exchange between the two campuses and staff sometimes give courses at both campuses, which enables the Al-Ain University to provide the same level of teaching in Al Ain and Abu Dhabi. However, it became clear that looking at staff, there is a disparity regarding the different specializations of the study programme and its teaching staff. Cur-

rently, many of the teaching staff members are specialised in public relations, whereas the number of teaching staff for the two other specializations is relatively low. Many of the teachers who currently teach journalism and advertising have their original qualification in public relations, which leads to a shifted perspective towards journalism and advertising. In consequence, the learner experience with a teacher originally coming from public relations will be different from the experience when taught by genuine journalist and advertisers. This reflection of the expert panel does not put into question the quality of teaching staff; however, it is more a reflection on the total balance of the teaching staff composition. Therefore, AAU should ensure that skill specifics in journalism and advertising are represented adequately in its staff portfolio when filling future vacancies. Prospective candidates also need to have significant practical experience in the field (**Finding 8**). Additionally, it would be wise to pay special attention to English proficiency of new teaching staff, because English is the lingua franca in mass communication. This would be beneficial for the programme on the long run, because faculty members who are linguistically equipped to read the latest English references, will use them as well in their courses. This will enhance the quality of the study programme even further.

The recruitment processes of new staff are transparently described and accessible on-line. The Al-Ain university has stated that special selection criteria regarding indicators such as academic performance, teaching experience or recently published work are being considered. Vacancies are announced on-line and the Al-Ain University has a non-discriminating policy which includes respect to gender, race, religion or physical disabilities.

#### **Conclusion:**

The panel of experts have seen clear and transparent procedures to recruit new staff. There are clear mechanisms to enhance to skills of the teaching staff and the link to international workshops and conferences is strongly supported by the Al-Ain University management. A special focus should be put on the disparity of teaching staff for each specialization. This criterion is fulfilled.

## **6. Learning Resources and Student Support**

Appropriate facilities and resources are available for learning and teaching activities.  
Guidance and support is available for students to advise on achieving successful completion of their studies.

### Facilities and resources

The programme is offered at both campuses of the university, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. All classrooms are described by the university to have internet and data show opportunities as well as slideshow projectors. On both campuses, computer labs are installed.

Al-Ain University's main library hosts, among others, books, periodicals and multimedia as well as access to E-books and E-journals. All in all, the library is said to contain more than 67.000 items, of which 1.445 refer to communication and media. The library is also responsible for E-learning resources which shall be applied.

The university charges tuition fees which constitute the main budget of the college, according to the SER. The president prepares the annual budget in cooperation with a Budget Committee, which has to be approved by the Board of Trustees.

### Information, consultation and guidance

All relevant study information is summarized in a students' handbook, available online or in hard copy. In cooperation with the Student Recruitment Unit, the college offers guidance and counsel-

ling in academic, educational, psychological and social matters. Each student is assigned an advisor from among the faculty. Teaching staff offer 1.5 hours daily as office hours.

According to the information provided in the SER, Al-Ain University provides scholarships and financial grants to students.

The programme is said to cater for the needs of employed students as classes are timetabled for the afternoon. Students with disability may approach the Disabled Students' Commission which will deal with cases on an individual basis. Furthermore, the university outlines that it provides facilities for students with disabilities and cooperates with related parties in offering further assistance, such as courses in sign language.

Offices and administrative units are assigned counselling functions, such as the Student Service Office and the Career Development Unit. This unit also offers support in finding internships. The Office of Alumni Relations provides support in enhancing the professional quality of students before and after graduation.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

During the interviews the experts learned that generally the students are satisfied with the provided level of information. By attending an introductory session, they are well-prepared for each course, including its assignments and its learning outcomes. Students are taken seriously and their learning progress is at the heart of the department's interest. Notwithstanding this positive teacher learner relation, the experts identified that students are not familiar with the number of self-study and in-class hours that are foreseen for each course. A clarification of the workload would fit with the overall well-coordinated programme at Al-Ain University and increase internal and external transparency. It will also further facilitate the well-functioning coordination between the two campuses. This clear breakdown of workload clarifying the amount of hours needed for each course (differentiating between time for self-study, examination and the course itself) will also be beneficial for Al-Ain University's internationalization process, because it helps to convert the credit system to other common credit systems such as ECTS (**Finding 9**).

As far as learning resources are concerned, AAU is equipped with modern facilities which include designated computer labs for the Mass Communication and Media programme and even recreational facilities on both campuses. A new building on the Al Ain campus will further complement the existing facilities. The collections of the libraries include recent literature, both in Arabic and English, and new acquisitions proposed by students and teaching staff are facilitated. Students can also access a variety of e-books and journals on-line.

In light of the undisputed need of the further development of field specific practical skills in the programme, critical reflection must be given to the level of specific technical equipment. During the site visit the experts learned that so far essential equipment is not provided by the university but has to be procured by the students. In some cases, the teaching staff places their own equipment at the disposal of the students. Consequently, it can be concluded that different qualities of equipment also impact the learner's progression. In order to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the programme, and enable equal achievement for all students, availability of equipment, such video equipment, cameras, voice recorders, headsets, etc., is essential and lies with the responsibility of the university (**Finding 10**).

The experts positively noted the way that students profit from the student support system at AAU. Besides the institutionalized Office of Student Affairs, the teaching staff offers extensive open hours and is regularly approachable for students. This support is not limited to course related questions but also extends to projects and internships. For the latter, the university stays in close contact with relevant companies and agencies whereas the teaching staff supervises interning students and remains available in case of questions. This overall close communication facilitates



the development of students as well as their part in the quality assurance process, as noted above.

Students will receive a student handbook at the beginning of their studies. The handbook includes general information about the university (such as the history of the university, mission and vision, physical resources or the credit hour system) and more specific information regarding each study programme (College structure, learning objectives on programme level and a study plan). Currently the course specific content is descriptive and process-oriented, neglecting an outcome orientation. Being a central element of student information and aiming to provide an advanced source of information for students, AAU should consider including skills and competencies within these descriptions as well (**Finding 11**). Undoubtedly specific course descriptions including appropriate learning outcomes were available as part of this review.

#### **Conclusion:**

The panel of experts testifies to the good system of AAU to provide support to its students. Institutionalized support structures are available and clear procedures are applied on university and on department level. Additional field-specific technical equipment will be required to better achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. Furthermore, clarifications regarding the workload of courses and the outcome-oriented descriptions on course level in the student handbook are encouraged. This criterion is hence only partially fulfilled.

## **7. Information**

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

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

Among the information and data which is outlined to be collected by the university are satisfaction surveys of the programme and the college, an exit survey and employers' surveys. Data on graduates is analysed by the Office of Alumni Relations. Feedback from the labour market is gathered via an employers' questionnaire, which assesses the employers' satisfaction with graduates. Additionally, according to the university, several units gather various student data, such as on the student population, their progression and success rates.

Information on the programme is available on the university's website, according to information provided in the SER.

#### **Experts' Evaluation**

The study programme to be assessed is a young study programme at the Al-Ain University, therefore collected data from relevant stakeholders and graduates is relatively little. Notwithstanding this fact, the experts confirm that the university considers the data collected from these stakeholders and acts accordingly when needed. The same applies for data collected from the current student body and the teaching staff. Positive recognition should be given to the fact that the department manages well to consider current developments and remain in constant dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

All information regarding the programme and the university regulations is published and easily accessible on the website as well as in form of hard copies (student handbook). This includes the intended learning outcomes at programme level, the admission regulations as well as teaching, learning and assessment procedures. The experts commend AAU for their policy to publish most documents on their website clearly underlining the intention to a maximum transparency.

As stated above, the panel of experts believes that the expected workload of each course has to be made transparent to display a clear division into present and self-learning hours. By doing so, this would facilitate students' time management but also enables teaching staff to reflect on their assigned work outside of class.

**Conclusion:**

Essential data is collected from relevant stakeholders and used to improve the programme, as well as communicated to the parties concerned. Programme and procedure-related information is published and includes all relevant information. Therefore, the criterion is fulfilled.

**Recommendations of the panel of experts**

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The panel of experts recommends

- to accredit the Bachelor programme Mass Communication and Media (Journalism, Advertising, PR) with conditions

offered by Al-Ain University of Science and Technology (UAE).

Findings:

1. The workload of students should be evaluated.
2. More practical skills have to be included in the curriculum. Specifically:
  - a. For the Journalism specialization: Practical courses e.g. "Story telling", "Online Production" or "Design programmes" have to be implemented within the journalism specialization to foster the creativity of the students.
  - b. For the Public Relations specialization: Practical courses focussing on the three perspectives of public relations (communication strategies, content creation and media production) have to be implemented.
  - c. For the Advertising specialization: The practical content in courses like "TV and radio advertising", "Printed advertising" and "Electronic advertising" has to be increased in order to fulfil the holistic approach of the specialization.
3. The department should pay special attention to the didactical order of courses, so that more specialised courses build on the competencies gained in the more general courses.
4. In the future development of the curriculum, the department should focus on topics such as "Social Media" or "Big Data". Especially the Social Media content should be tackled from two sides (strategic vision and tools of social media) to connect theory and practice.
5. Courses strengthening the English proficiency of students should be fostered in the curriculum to create a level of specific terminologies within the discipline.
6. The methods of interdisciplinary group work should be further developed within the classes.
7. More reflection- and skill-oriented project-based examinations should be considered in practical courses.
8. When filling future vacancies, AAU should ensure that skills specific to journalism and advertising are represented adequately in its staff portfolio.

9. A clear breakdown of workload clarifying the hours is needed for each course (differentiating between time for self-study, examination and the course itself).
10. AAU has to ensure that field-specific technical equipment such as video equipment, cameras, voice recorders, headsets is available for students in order to train their practical skills.
11. To further strengthen the independence of the learner and provide an advanced source of information for students, AAU should consider including skills and competencies within the descriptions in the student handbook.