

## **Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS on the study programmes**

- **Geography B.A.**
- **Geography M.A.**

**offered by the Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman)**

**Based on the report of the expert panel and the discussions of the Accreditation Commission in its 65. meeting on 22./23. May 2017, the Accreditation Commission decides:**

1. The study programme “**Geography**” (**Bachelor of Arts**) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman)** is accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Programme Accreditation.

The accreditation is **conditional**.

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 study programme “**Geography**” (**Master of Arts**) offered by **Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman)** is accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Programme Accreditation.

The accreditation is **conditional**.

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

3. The conditions have to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions has to be documented and reported to AQAS no later than **28. February 2018**.
4. The accreditation is given for the period of **five years** and is valid until **30. September 2022**.

### **Condition for the Bachelor programme:**

1. The assessment methods have to correspond more closely with the Intended Learning Outcomes. There should be a stronger emphasis on critical thinking abilities instead of a reproduction of knowledge.

The condition is given based on the expert’s assessment, as the Accreditation Commission concludes that the criterion “Quality of the Curriculum” is only partially met.

**Conditions for the Master programme:**

1. The link between the defined Intended Learning Outcomes and the curriculum needs to be transparently outlined. It has to be transparent how the various elements of the curriculum guarantee the achievement of the defined competencies.
2. The course syllabus of Advanced Remote Sensing (GEOG6122) needs to be listed in the file of the course descriptions of the Department and made available.

The first condition is given based on the expert's assessment, as the Accreditation Commission concludes that the criterion "Quality of the Curriculum" is only partially met.

The second condition is given based on the expert's assessment in the full text of the report, as the Accreditation Commission concludes that the criterion "Information" is only partially met.

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

1. The course "Research Methods in Geography" should be shifted to an earlier semester.
2. Qualitative techniques and methods should play a more visible role in methodological teaching and fieldwork courses.

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

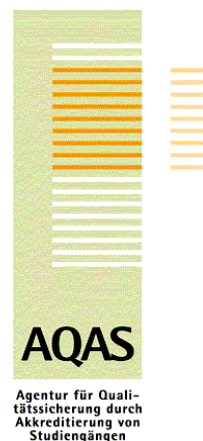
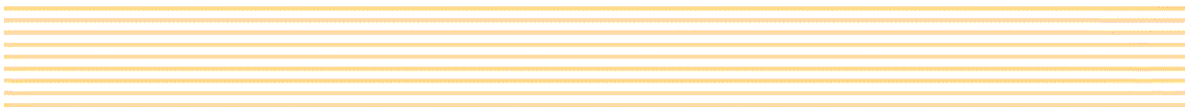
1. In the medium term the profile of the Master programme should be further developed in order to clearly outline what the qualification will be upon completion independent from individualization.
2. The number of classes taught in English should be increased in the Master programme.
3. An internship should be introduced.
4. The Master Thesis should be credited.

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

1. Student's workload should be addressed more explicitly in the evaluations.
2. The Department should actively take action facilitating student mobility and international exchange.

Based on the Geography departments' comments on the experts report the Accreditation Commission concludes that finding 11 of the expert group does not lead to a recommendation of the Accreditation Commission.

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



## Experts' Report

on the degree programmes:

- **Geography B.A.**
- **Geography M.A.**

offered by the Sultan Qaboos University

Visit to the University: 5 -7 March 2017

### Panel of Experts:

<b>Abdulah Al-Belushi</b>	Navigation Information Technology, General Manager, Muscat, Oman (representative from the labor market)
<b>Prof. Dr. Boris Braun</b>	University of Cologne, Institute of Geography and Global South Study Center, Cologne, Germany
<b>Prof. Kosmas Pavlopoulos PhD</b>	Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, Department of Geography and Planning, Abu Dhabi, UAE
<b>Steffen Regis</b>	B.Sc. Geography, University of Kiel, Germany (student expert)
<b>Coordinator:</b> Ronny Heintze / Doris Herrmann	AQAS e.V., Cologne, Germany

## **1. Introduction**

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

The University submitted a Self Evaluation Report (SER). The accreditation procedure was officially initialized by a decision of the AQAS Accreditation Commission on 20./21. February 2017. The Accreditation Commission nominated the before mentioned expert panel and the University did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

After a review of the Self Evaluation Report, from 5 - 7 March 2017 a site visit to the University took place. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders in separate discussions and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings by the group of experts to the University representatives.

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

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

While the construction of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) started in 1982, the first students were enrolled in 1986. The University commenced with five colleges: Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science. Furthermore, the College of Arts and Social Sciences was established in 1987.

Today the nine university colleges offer 63 undergraduate programs, 62 Master and 34 PhD programmes.

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

Sultan Qaboos University follows a credit system whereby students' progress towards graduation in their College/Major through studying a specific number of credits in each semester that count toward the total number of credits required for graduation in their particular College. The Credit Hours of Sultan Qaboos University can be transferred in the ECTS.

When the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was established in 1986, Geography was taught as a subfield in the Department of History and Geography, College of Education. The main purpose for the department was to offer courses in the field of social sciences to graduate teachers. Since the inception of the College of Arts in 1987, Geography has become one of the main subjects in the

College, but it was affiliated with the History Department. Following the establishment of the College of Arts and Social Sciences new building in 1993, Geography was relocated to become a full-fledged academic department in the newly established college.

## 2. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance

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

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

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

Following the information provided in the Self Evaluation Report the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) developed quality indicators and practices to address its unique institutional needs and relevance within the Omani's higher education context. In October 2011, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) was formed. QAAC comprises representatives from all academic programs in CASS, under the direct supervision of the Dean and Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies and Dean of CASS. The QAAC has a permanent office, rapporteur and staff to execute duties and follow-up administrative tasks. The committee was charged with developing quality indicators, practices and procedures. Their first assignment was to develop a road map for institutional and programmes accreditation in CASS.

In 2011 the Department of Geography conducted an external programme review by two reviewers from Germany and United Kingdom which identified strengths and weaknesses and resulted in an action plan to address the findings of the reviewers.

In the following year the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee of the department was formed with the main functions of:

- promotion of quality culture in the Department,
- managing the Department accreditation processes,
- monitoring adherence to quality standards and practices,
- follow up the implementation of the recommendation of reviewers.

In order to monitor the achievements of the Department different domains were defined that are assessed with a number of predefined Key Performance Indicators (KPI). These cover teaching and learning with KPIs such as the Number of courses with less than 30 students, the number of undergraduate students on probation, or the number of students who graduate on time.

A Stakeholder Advisory Board includes the external perspective. Students are involved in the Quality Assurance Processes by participation in course evaluations and by a specific student liaison committee.

## Experts' Evaluation

The responsibility within both programmes and consequently within the Department is clearly defined and students know about the responsibilities. The course plan is available to the public in its most up to date version and it is updated when required.

SQU is currently in the process of implementing a central quality assurance system for the whole university. This system in some aspects is still in a phase of development and some instruments will only have effects after some years of implementation, so the expert panel cannot fully assess how effective the system works for and affects the study programmes in Geography. Based on the presented evidence and discussions on site the implemented system is quite advanced resulting in a certain complexity. It will be wise to focus on the link between central quality assurance office and the departmental level and always consider the last phase of the PDCA cycle as crucial for the success of a system. In this sense particularly the integration of the programme's stakeholders (students, graduates, employers of Geography) into the QA procedures needs special attention.

The expert panel is firmly convinced that students and staff are highly motivated to contribute to the further development of the study programmes. Considering this impression and based on the very constructive talks with students and teachers the Department should reassure that the continuous improvement tools are well shaped to adequately involve students and teachers also in the relevant decision making structures on Department level. Another option for further improvement of students' participation could be the permanent integration of student's spokesmen into the regular Department meetings.

Furthermore the experts recognized that students asked for more informal possibilities for feedback, e.g. an open forum once a year to discuss the programmes conditions and upcoming problems. A direct communication process could further enhance the quality as it saves time for finding suitable solutions which fit the needs of the Department as well as the students' needs. The students liaison committee seems to be a step in the right direction while it shall be reassured that the issues discussed there are well documented and followed up.

Further positive mention should be given to student evaluations, which are implemented for all courses. However, a rather low participation by students remains a challenge. The Department should not weaken its initiatives to increase student participation in these evaluations. A useful consideration could be to find ways to discuss the evaluation results with the students and create transparency on impacts and consequences. While this already happens in some cases – that are very well recognized by students – broadening this practice could help students see that their evaluation is taken seriously and also leads to continuous improvement.

Looking at the evaluations the experts recognize that student's workload is not specifically addressed by the evaluation-instruments used (**Finding**). While the well established communication between students and staff clearly allows the Department to recognize of there is an overburdening in specific cases, a systematic evaluation of student workload will allow the Department not only to react to extremely critical cases once they happen. Student workload would be a great addition to the existing course file and at the same time facilitate the conversion from SQU Credit Hour System to ECTS for cases of international mobility.

### 3. 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.

### 3.1 Bachelor of Arts Geography

The B.A. Geography consists of 120 Credit Hours and has four different specializations: (1) Environmental Studies, (2) Urban and Regional Planning, (3) Geographic Information Systems, and (4) Population Studies. The latter two were introduced in 2004 while the former two specializations already exist since 1999.

Before starting the studies of their respective field, all students are required to undergo a one year foundation programme levelling different incoming qualifications and assuring students meet the minimal requirements in fields as English, Mathematics, and Information Technology.

The curriculum consists of three different types of courses:

- University Requirements (6CH) and University Electives (6CH). These courses are the same for all students at SQU and cover aspects like Arabic language, Contemporary Omani Society or Oman and Islamic Civilization.
- College Requirements (11CH) and College Electives (3CH). These courses are the same for all students enrolled in the College of Arts and Social Sciences and cover aspects of Arabic Language Skills I & II, Critical Thinking and Problem solving, or Computer Skills
- Courses specific to the Geography programme consisting of 61 Credit Hours that are the same for all four specializations and 33 Credit Hours specific to the four specializations.

The programme follows four defined learning objectives: (1) To produce graduates who know and understand the interrelationships between fundamental concepts and skills in the major domains of geography (physical geography, human geography, human-environment interactions, and geographic information system). (2) To produce graduates who can apply their geographic knowledge and practical skills that help them to manage issues concerning people, places, and environments. (3) To produce graduates who understand and can apply descriptive and analytical knowledge about map reading, statistics, geospatial technologies to the continuous changing interaction of people to their physical and human environments at local to global scales. (4) To motivate graduates for innovation and creativity.

This results in the following intended learning outcomes:

- (1) Graduates will learn fundamental concepts in physical geography, human geography, regional planning and human-environment interactions in an interdisciplinary context, while developing technical proficiency.
- (2) Graduates will learn to describe, analyse, and explain the patterns, processes, and interactions of human and physical phenomena on Earth's surface.
- (3) Graduates will practice their knowledge through training and field work.
- (4) Graduates will learn to use creative thinking, problem solving, communication, innovation, collaboration and critical thinking skills.

The courses offered for all four specializations cover topics like Fundamentals of Geography, Economic Geography, Physical Geography of Oman, or Political Geography. The specializations

then address the more specific topics and build on a common knowledge acquired in the more introductory courses that are shared by all specializations.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

Regarding the quality of the curriculum and the Intended Learning Outcomes the B.A. programme is considered very positively by the panel of experts. It is well-structured and well-balanced between "requirements" and "electives" as well as between general subjects (University Requirements, University Electives, College Requirements and College Electives, in sum 26 Credit Hours) and specific geography courses (61 CH in general geography, 33 CH specific to the four specializations). The curricular structure of the study programme clearly supports the achievement of the Intended Learning Outcomes. All curricular elements (courses/modules) as well as their functions are well-documented – particularly when considering the course files. The curriculum covers subject-specific and cross-subject knowledge as well as subject-related, methodological, and general skills.

The four areas of specialization are adequate with regard to academic standards and in line with labour market expectations. Academic qualifications accomplished by the teaching correspond convincingly with the four areas of specialization. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are an important field of competence within the B.A. programme Geography at SQU and are currently in high demand of the labour market. Thus, GIS is not only relevant for the respective specialization, but does also play a significant role in the other three strands of specialization. However, apart from GIS there seem to be little synthetic or integrating elements between the four different specializations. While keeping the four specializations these integrative links could be strengthened in future – possibly in form of cross-cutting student projects. These projects/courses could not only inter-link the different strands of specialization but might also help to overcome the divide between theory and application that at least some students seem to feel.

Recognizing the well structured positioning of the courses within the curriculum, a slight exception can be found in the course "Research Methods in Geography", as it is placed relatively late in the study programme (semester 6). To strengthen a comprehensive understanding of the theory-empirics link, the expert panel strongly suggests shifting this course to an earlier semester (**Finding**). Considering the provided documentation the curriculum seems to be mostly focussing on quantitative methodology (GIS, statistics, etc.). Qualitative techniques and methods are not as visible and consequently seem to receive less attention. To reflect the modern development in human geography, these techniques and methods should play a more visible role in methodological teaching and field work courses too (**Finding**).

Even though the B.A. programme is well-structured, it also appears rather complex at first sight. The syllabus/curriculum is mainly presented in difficult-to-read inter-linking tables. While all this is academically correct, it doesn't facilitate the understanding of the programme for relevant stakeholders outside SQU. It would be advisable to develop a visually attractive and easier to understand graphical overview showing the main elements of the programme and their succession for each area of specialization. Transparency could be further improved by making more intuitive exemplary study plans available that show how the different semesters might look like (e.g. also for foreign students).

The expert panel appreciates the bilingual character of the B.A. programme and believes that the adaption of the programme that happened some years ago was a good step. A substantial percentage of courses are already taught in English, especially in the GIS specialization. The English component should be further strengthened in future – also in the other specializations – to (1) better prepare Omani students for bachelor courses or master programmes abroad, and to (2) make the B.A. programme more attractive for international students. However, courses in Arabic



should continue to play a prominent role in the study programme because of domestic labour market requirements (for example in Urban and Regional Planning).

As the graduation project marks the point where students are supposed to demonstrate that they have achieved the Intended Learning Outcomes of the programme it might be worth considering strengthening the thesis part of the project. This would assure that the theoretic foundations of the academic programme are well represented without neglecting the application. Inevitably this would require a more adequate allocation of Credit Hours representing the importance of this final project and correlating it stronger with the expected student workload.

### **3.2 Master of Arts Geography**

The Master programme in Geography offered at the College of Arts and Sciences of SQU has a duration of two years in full time study or three years in part-time studies, including all required courses and the thesis. After introducing the programme in 2008 with Arabic as sole teaching language, in 2012 the programme became bilingual with Arabic and English as teaching languages. Entry requirements request that applicants should achieve band 5.5 in IELTS Academic, 525 in the TOEFL paper-based, 196 in TOEFL computer-based, or 69 in the TOEFL through the Internet. Candidates should have a Bachelor's degree in Geography or in a related subject from Sultan Qaboos University or from any other recognized university.

Since 2014 also foreign students are accepted to attend this master programme. The fees are 3000 OR (4000 OR for foreign students). The students should complete the course work requirements specified in the degree plan with a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.00. Annually approximately 20 candidates apply for the programme while only two to four students are accepted as fulfilling the entry requirements.

The aim of the programme is to provide the candidates with theoretical and methodological skills enabling them to qualify for a Master's Degree. The topics are supposed to be related to issues of relevance for the study of Human Geography, Physical Geography and environmental problems in Oman. The courses shall aim at introducing the candidates to contemporary scientific discourses on human-nature relations and development, and provide them with analytical skills and critical thinking.

The following learning objectives are defined for the programme: (1) Develop a basic understanding of the discipline of geography as a whole, its relationship with cognate fields, and its contribution to knowledge, (2) develop a detailed understanding of at least one specialty within the discipline, (3) develop an ability to do independent research of professional quality, (4) develop an ability to communicate the results of research in both oral and written forms.

These objectives have lead to the definition of the following intended learning outcomes:

- (1) Graduates will develop working knowledge of the general literature in geography, and familiarity with the structure of the discipline, including the principal sub-disciplines, the main philosophical approaches and unique geographical concepts.
- (2) Graduates will develop understanding of a particular literature, its major works, its historical development and its main theories and empirical findings.
- (3) Graduates will gain theoretical and practical knowledge of specific research techniques and demonstrating this knowledge in the conduct of original research
- (4) Graduates will provide evidence with their thesis of the ability to write up research and, defend their work orally to the Department.

The degree plan includes six main/core courses (18 CH in total) and two elective courses (6 CH in total). The thesis writing, submission and oral defence had zero Credit Hours and the students should register for the thesis in the third semester after having completed at least 12 Credit Hours of the course work. The total Credit Hours needed for graduation are 24-18 by main courses and 6 by electives.

Courses contributing to the achievement of the Intended Learning Outcomes are Advanced Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods, Advanced Geographical Information Systems, Special Topics on Human Geography, as well as two out of eight elective courses like Resources Management in Arid Regions, Contemporary Geomorphologic Processes, or Urbanization.

Thesis requirements include a literature review, undertaking of research, analysis of the results, writing a report and communication of the results at an oral defence. While this doesn't necessarily need to be original research, it is required to be at least a new application of ideas.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

Looking at the programme and course plan of the Master programme it is obvious that the main idea of the structure is persuading. It seems to the experts that for the current situation and very small number of students the chosen concept allows the required and desired flexibility to allow shaping an individual programme depending on incoming students based on the available and well defined structures. However, looking at the provided documentation of the programme it was not possible for the experts to identify a clear vision or profile of the Master programme. During the discussions on site it became clear to the experts that obviously there is a shared understanding of the profile of the Master programme within the Department, however, this is not visible based on the documentation at this time. Consequently the link between the defined Intended Learning Outcomes and the curriculum is less obvious than it should be. While with the low number of students achievement can be reached by intense individualization, with the intended growing number of students the current approach will not be able to succeed (**Finding**). To demonstrate the plausibility of achievement of the Intended Learning Outcomes on programme level the Department should present a comprehensible matrix which shows how curricular elements contribute to the achievement.

It became obvious to the experts that the successful reshaping of the Bachelor programme was not yet continued by a comparable process for the Master programme as it currently offers a very broad qualification. While it meets the requirements of the Master level, it is not fully transparent to outsiders what the qualification of the graduate of the programme will be despite looking at the individual student and showing achievement on the individual level. The profile of the programme should be further developed in order to clearly outline what the qualification will be upon completion. When doing so the Department should seriously consider integrating a yet missing modern and more specialized approach with applied projects and more modern techniques and methods for the Master programme and in the course syllabi (**Finding**).

Considering the details of the curriculum in particular the syllabi of the main courses Advanced Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods (GEOG6111), Special Topics on Physical Geography (GEOG6112), Special Topics on Human Geography (GEOG6113), and Advanced Geographical Information Systems (GEOG 6121) are well structured and the courses description, the aims, the objectives, and the lecture schedule are well and clearly described. The key to further improve these modules is to introduce case studies (from all over the world, not only from the region), with more applications and techniques which must be related with labour demands.

Otherwise the course syllabus of Advanced Remote Sensing (GEOG6122) is not listed in the file of the course descriptions of the Department, although it is considered as one of the most essen-

tial courses for the specialization of the master students. Based on the available documentation about the course Geographical Thought (GEOG 6114) and considering the course description, objectives and lecture schedule, the course much more seems like an introductory course dealing with the history and philosophy of geographical science. It remains unclear to the panel of experts why it is one of the core courses of the programme, as it does not serve or endorse the main goals and visions of it. Judging on the documented contents it looks more like an introductory course and could also be placed in a Bachelor degree. When further developing the programme and strengthening its profile, it might be worth considering moving the course from the core courses to an elective or replacing it with e.g. Urbanization (GEOG6138).

The expert group fully supports the introduction of English as teaching language in the Master programme and highly encourages to further support that trend. While the high entry requirement for English language makes perfect sense for the programme, the importance of the language use should then also be reflected in the curriculum by extending the number of classes taught in English (**Finding**).

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

Recognizing the highly capable staff that has the full capacity and competences to support the Master programme, unused potential could be utilized by strengthening scientific cooperation with other Departments of SQU to increase interdisciplinary research (e.g. Earth science, Archaeology, Social sciences, Geo-informatics, etc.). It seems to the experts that this area at this point is still in an early phase with good ideas so implementation can only be further encouraged.

One final point to be mentioned is the fact that the Master thesis and the work linked to it is not connected with any Credit Hours. During the discussions on site it was pointed out that this reflects a university wide regulation that is the same for all Master programmes at SQU. However, the obvious disadvantages of this regulation could not be neglected. By assigning zero credit hours to the thesis, the value of it is not at all reflected in the course plan. Even when considering that at SQU the link between credit hours and student workload is more indirect, nobody outside the system can understand the position and value of the thesis within the programme. Finally this regulation clearly marks a disadvantage for SQU students aim for international mobility as well as incomings when compared internationally. Consequently the expert panel recommends to provide credits for the Master thesis (**Finding**).

#### 4. Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students

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

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

Based on the information provided in the SER, faculty members use a range of learning technologies to enhance their teaching and learning methods. Moodle is used by faculties and provides an interactive e-learning platform. The learning objectives are supposed to be achieved through the following approaches:

- Learning through fieldwork: Fieldwork shall provide opportunities for the first hand investigation of people in their environment and as such awakens students to a diversity of environments and cultures, in their local area and beyond. It shall teach students to collect, analyze and present data, sharpening their observations, measuring, recording and evaluation skills.
- Learning through maps: Maps in the form of paper, digital images and globes are supposed to be an important tool for geographers and enable them to record, display and analyze information about people and environments.
- Learning through information technology: Information and Communications technology e.g. a personal computer, an interactive whiteboard, or a mobile phone influences how students make sense of their world today and at the same time offer a range of tools to support their geographical understanding.
- Learning through simulations.

The SQU Undergraduate Academic Regulations organizes the examination process. The College Examination Committee is responsible for supervising the University & College requirements examinations and ensuring these examinations are conducted properly and in accordance with SQU regulations. The Head of Department and the Department representative in the College Examination Committee are responsible for monitoring the examination process on the departmental level.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

During the site visit at SQU the expert panel held different talks with teachers and students as well as employees and graduates of B.A. and M.A. of Geography to receive an impression on the learning conditions and quality of teaching. The expert panel is firmly convinced that the quality of both teaching and learning conditions clearly meet the requirements of higher education. Especially the variety of used learning methods during the whole study time e.g. group learning, projects, field work or/and software based applications fulfil all expectations concerning the diversity of students' learning behaviour. Furthermore, the recently established Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) will help to further improve the didactic skills of the teaching staff. Employers confirm that graduates are equipped with soft skills required by the labour market and express their general satisfaction with the quality of the study programmes. The portfolio of courses is supported with an online learning platform (Moodle) offering self-trainings or quizzes suitable to the specific course.

Concerning the teaching methods and the Intended Learning Outcomes of the study programmes, the experts see a high emphasis on knowledge transfer. The reviewed exams confirm this impression and appear to focus on memorized learning. Also students confirm a solid amount of "theoretical" teaching during the courses. Recognizing the importance of theoretical foundations, the experts also want to encourage implementing teaching methods combining scientific theory and application in the courses. Particularly reflecting on the reviewed student works, the

experts strongly suggest including the assessment of critical thinking skills in written exams and not only focusing on the knowledge component (**Finding**).

Recognizing to the important role of community service as one target of the study programmes the expert panel confirms a good representation of this aspect in the programme and furthermore believes that one way to further strengthen this aspect is an increased use of external lecturers so students learn the practical application of knowledge in situations outside the university context.

Also considering the student feedback in the interviews the expert panel confirms a high level of transparency concerning assessment regulations and procedures, which are available online. Students know the organizational structure as well as responsibilities in case of complaints about grading or other conditions of examination. The details of courses (Intended Learning Outcomes, regulations on assessment and attendance, etc.) are available online respectively in the course files.

SQU has a common policy on assessments and grading on university level, so there is little scope for individual regulations in the Department. Courses are usually completed with assignments, one mid-term and final exam. In general, the applied assessment methods correspond with the Intended Learning Outcomes of the courses. The variety of examination methods is regulated by the SQU's policies.

On a very positive note the experts recognise the evaluation of courses at the end of the semester and the follow-up process with clearly organized responsibilities on Department and college level. Questions on didactics, assessments and course organization combined with open questions are appropriate to assure the quality of courses. Students and graduates confirm that the Department adopts adequate measures to resolve evaluated problems in the study programmes.

Keeping in mind that there has been a substantive change in the structure of the bachelor programme in 2012 it is comprehensible that no long-term information on evaluation results is available today. However, the policies and procedures for quality assurance (see above) and internal monitoring on Department and college level fulfil the expectations that seem reasonable at this time.

Undoubtedly the integration of students with special needs is exemplary. Regulations concerning the compensation of disadvantages for examinations are made public on the internet and assistance is given to the students according to their individual needs.

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

Consistently applied, pre-defined, published regulations are in place which cover student admission, progression, recognition, and certification.
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Before entering the Bachelor programme all students undergo the so-called Foundation Programme. This year is compulsory for all students studying at SQU. The Foundation Programme (FP) at Sultan Qaboos University became a mandatory introduction for study in all the university's colleges as of the academic year 2010/2011. The programme has been designed to prepare undergraduate students who have been accepted at the university to achieve the required educational goal outputs in accordance with the Omani academic standards. The programme qualifies the student in English language, mathematics, and information technology, and study and learning skills.

Based on the information provided in the Self Evaluation Report admission to the Geography Department relies upon SQU and College of Arts and Social Sciences admission regulations and

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

- Student interests
- Number of places available in the programme
- English placement test results
- The Geography Department enrolls bachelor students after passing the foundation programme and achieving level six in English.

The Department outlines that the intake to the Geography Department reduced after the programme became bilingual in 2012. The higher English proficiency requirement reduced the intake from 70 – 90 students to nowadays 55 – 68 students.

The admission requirements for the Master programme are defined as follows:

- Bachelor's degree in Geography or in a related subject from Sultan Qaboos University or from any other recognized university;
- cumulative Grade Point Average of not less than 2.75 on a four-point scale or its equivalent in another system;
- cumulative Grade Point Average between 2.5 and 2.74 may be considered for admission subject to work experiences and any other academic activities.

Every applicant must submit a release letter or a study leave from employer for full time study or no objection letter for part-time study, addressed to the dean of postgraduate studies at SQU. Unemployed applicants need to submit a statement from the Public Authority of Manpower Register documenting the unemployment status of the applicant. Before starting the programme the applicant undergoes an admission exam as well as an interview and must proof appropriate English language proficiency.

The College has defined structures for recognition in case of so called transfer students. These regulations are described to be practiced well and focus on transfers from one Department to another within SQU.

In order to monitor student's progression an academic advising process is responsible for the implementation of the study plan. The student and an academic advisor are primarily responsible to follow the study plan. It is outlined that sometimes students enrol in courses without getting advice from their academic advisor resulting in confusion in the student's plan, and in some cases this forces the student to stay an additional semester, or maybe even longer.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

Since 2012 the Bachelor programme is held bilingual in Arabic and English language, and consequently minimum English language skills are required for admission. Students who do not initially fulfil the entry requirements in English and e.g. mathematics take part in a foundation programme for up to one year in order to make sure that once the curriculum starts all students can follow the substance and do not struggle with the fundamental skills required for successful studies. The experts conclude that the admission regulations are adequate to the requirements of the Bachelor programme. They are available publicly on the internet. Overall there is no doubt that the admission process is performing well, which is supported by the positive feedback of Department staff and students. The QA system provides additional quantitative data on admission. It might be interesting to enhance this quantitative data by adding qualitative information.

Looking at the admission criteria for the master programme the issues raised in the assessment of the quality of the curriculum can not be left aside. The entry requirements – particularly regarding English language – are very high. The experts clearly support the idea to keep this requirement, however it remains unclear how this requirement is justified by the current curriculum. It could not be clarified why the current curricular demands require this level of English. Consequently this line of argumentation supports the recommendation to further develop the Master curriculum and strengthen English as teaching language.

It is assessed positively how students are guided through the first year and the geography studies by academic advisors who give advice and support in all academic and social affairs. They support within the selection of courses and help on individual questions about learning and examination techniques. The expert panel would like to emphasize the important role of academic advisors for a successful study process and supports the efforts of SQU, CASS and the Department of geography on student's support.

The international mobility of students should play an important role in the future development of the Department of geography at CASS. The experts positively recognize strong efforts to adjust the study programmes and particularly the Bachelor programme to also raise the number of international students and outgoing students. This is exemplified by the change to the bilingual Bachelor programme in 2012. While regulations are in place that allow for international mobility of students (incoming and outgoing) it is obvious that in reality only very few cases of mobility occur. Recognizing and respecting that it is important to maintain its own identity and also embedding in the regional cultural context, within the academic sphere exchange of ideas and exposure to different contexts are a vital part of the academic advancement. Considering that yet there are no outgoing students, it is necessary to take further steps to enhance the possibilities for students to study abroad. The Department and potentially CASS should enter partnerships with institutions abroad also covering student mobility to use learning agreements with their outgoing students to facilitate the international exchange **(Finding)**.

Furthermore, it seems highly recommendable to issue standardized diploma supplements explaining the achieved qualification and the position in the Higher Education system of graduates in order to facilitate a further academic career in foreign countries **(Finding)**.

## 6. 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.

The Department has 19 staff members; 13 of them being professors, two lecturers and four coordinators, technicians and training supervisors. A full list of Department staff members including their profiles is made available for the review as part of the documentation. All academic Department members hold PhDs, Master's and Bachelor's degrees from USA, UK, Germany, China, Qatar, Jordan, and Oman. Currently the student-staff-ratio lies between 13.9 and 14.7 : 1.

The recruitment policy for Omani staff follows the idea that the best graduates of the University are appointed as demonstrators and sent abroad for their Masters and PhDs before their appointment as Assistant Professors. Beyond this, SQU outlines that it actively recruits international staff members to complete the academic staff portfolio.

SQU also provides opportunities for professional development to improve staff skills enhancing teaching quality. In-house workshops are offered by the Centre for Education Technology (CET), the Centre for Staff Development (CSD) and the Centre for Information Systems (CIS). The CET and CIS also support teaching with media equipment and e-learning services on using them.

A Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning was established recently to support and advance learning and teaching, as well as facilitate the exchange good practices across the University.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The procedures of the promotion and the requirement for the new academic staff are well defined and documented by the University by transparent procedures. Their specializations and fields of research and expertise cover well the interdisciplinary demand of the Geographical Sciences. More than 60% of the academic staff is very active in research, publications in peer-reviewed journals, thesis supervising and teaching. The teaching load of the faculty staff in both programmes is quite high but acceptable when compared internationally.

Some members of the teaching staff participate in Research Centers or academic committees. This instrument of cross-department cooperation should be strengthened and could also create synergies for teaching as disciplines and specializations with certain similarities exist in other Departments of SQU. By cross-department coordination new/more courses could be developed without stretching existing resources. This spirit of cooperation and cooperativeness is particularly advantageous for the Department of geography since one of the most obvious characteristics of academic staff and the employers of graduates of the Department perceived by the panel of expert was a clear and active spirit of teamwork. The alumni and the graduate student's interview also verified that.

It can also be positively recognized that many of the academic staff already worked on national or international scientific collaborations and common research projects in multi-disciplinary fields related with the geographical sciences. This practice should be broadened and advanced further involving all academic staff members.

In this context the issue of sustainability of the Master programme shall not be ignored. Currently the intake in the Master programme is quite low creating a comparably high teaching load. While it could be explained how currently the teaching of the Master can be justified and the experts can agree to this view, at the same time the experts believe that on the long run the Master programme can only be sustainable with a larger number of students. Consequently the considerations listed above could also be read in the light of creating an even stronger programme to assure its sustainability.

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

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

Financially, SQU outlines it is a free University. No fees are paid as all undergraduate academic services are for free. All the students additionally receive a monthly financial allowance to ensure their ability to focus on education without any financial constraints. All the students receive daily



meals as well as in-campus transportation. All female students as well as male students with special needs are allowed to live inside the campus where five residential complexes are available.

Academic advising is an integral part of the semester credit system adopted by the University. The purpose of academic advising is to provide students with information and guidance so that they may take responsibility for their study programme and achieve their academic objectives. Advising process starts with an orientation programme (one week before the Fall Semester) where new students meet the Dean, the Assistant Deans, Heads of the Departments, and Faculty Members. The objective of this orientation is to guide the new students making a smooth and successful transition to the University life by helping them with the academic, personal and social adjustments needed. In addition to touring the campus, students are informed about the registration and the advising processes as well as services available on campus. Then, students are assigned academic advisors (faculty members) from her/his major Department. Academic advisors are available to the students in order to advice on all kinds of questions regarding their programme.

The classrooms used by the Department vary in their sizes. The classrooms' sizes range from 15 to 35 students per class. All of the classrooms are equipped with a whiteboard, overhead projector, LCD projector, and computer. Some classes are also equipped with a TV and a DVD player. The Department also has two labs for remote sensing and GIS with 22 desktops each.

Students are allowed to use the college library or the main library. Both libraries provide collections relevant for the area of the programme. The collection of the main library is much bigger than the college library however. The library systems allow the students to borrow 5 books for 3 weeks with one option to extend.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU has diversity of learning resources ranging from a state of art library to college library, and internet access amongst other possible learning facilities. The main library is very well equipped, with different support systems and an easy to use searching and borrowing system. The system used to access academic articles and research papers is up to the current standards and provides students with the ability to get official copies under the copyright law for students use. The access to journals is very well. The library is accessible until in the late evening and during examination periods it is open for 24 hours.

The College has it is own class- and lecture-rooms that both programmes use. Computer labs and their equipment are sufficient in regard of space, IT support and a comfortable atmosphere for the number of students in the programme. Certainly the experts agree that the expressed demand for more physical space would further increase the teaching opportunities due to a broader selection of laboratory's and additional equipment. The university is also fully equipped with large lecture rooms to be used for large scale audiences.

The programme-specific labs are equipped with software and tools suitable for all students to do proper research and for many industry-related research scenarios. The availability of licensed software allows students to perform useful research and get in touch with the equipment also used in the field. The labs reflect a high standard in terms of IT, equipment, software and industry data and thus support the achievement of the Intended Learning Outcomes of the different courses.

Students support services offered by SQU in general and the Geography Department in College of Art and Social Science in particular are manifold starting form introductory information to support in the registration process, as well as advice in selection of subjects or specialization. The

information is provided in form of hard copies (booklets) and is also accessible on the College website.

Furthermore and to guide the student through the courses, an academic advisor is assigned to each of the students. The College teaching staff also offers frequent consultation hours to students to guide them in selection of subjects, specializations and electives. The courses and module descriptions are available to students so they are informed about the Intended Learning Outcomes, methods of teaching and learning, methods of assessment, and expected self-study.

The College also offers international mobility regulations, mainly for practical placements and internships. While the regulations are the same for all programmes of the College, it can be identified that yet these mobilities are not used by students of the Geography Department. Clearly this is a great unused potential as outgoings as well as incoming students offer great chances not only for the individual students, but they also create benefits for the institutions. Hence the Department should actively start initiatives to support student mobility **(Finding)**.

Concluding it can be stated that the learning resources and student support services in the Department of Geography are of very good quality and adequate for the successful implementation of the Bachelor as well as the Master programme.

## 8. 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.

The Department outlines that information is collected from different sources and stakeholders including the following:

- Students (Academic Advising, Students' liaison committee),
- The Department Board Meetings and related Departmental committees,
- The College Board Meetings and related college committees,
- Internal and external quality and inspections and reports.

In addition, at the level of the College, a programme to strengthen links with alumni was initiated. This programme aims at stipulating the academic Department to update continuously their alumni database, maintain contact with them, and arrange an annual event where alumni meet with academic staff and students to discuss academic programmes and employment of graduates.

### Experts' Evaluation

As it became obvious to the panel of experts during the site visit, generally the flow of information and its documentation works well between different parts of the university and between the Department and the relevant stakeholders.

The Department of Geography at SQU maintains strong and very useful links with alumni and labour market representatives. While systematic alumni work is mostly coordinated on the central level of the University in a well equipped quality assurance office, there are also meetings between the geography teaching staff and geography alumni. Twice a year employers are invited to participate in meetings to discuss qualifications as well as the curriculum. This facilitates a constant flow of information between labour market representatives and the teaching staff in geogra-

phy. Information on potential employment fields is available for graduates. Beyond this, a more systematic and potentially regular survey of graduate employment-careers could further strengthen the knowledge base on labour market opportunities of SQU geography graduates.

The central quality assurance office also makes available statistical data regarding study progress, length of studies or the number of students who require special attention due to low performance.

To the panel of experts the communication among staff members and between teaching staff and students seems to be very good. The system of academic advisors works well and ensures a high quality of individual guidance. Student complaints can be discussed with instructors, but also with the Head of Department. More fundamental conflicts can even be taken to the Deputy Vice Chancellor. It seems reasonably transparent to all members of the expert panel how complaints are dealt with and during the interviews students seemed familiar with the options how to make their voice heard in the university.

The Head of Department overlooks all courses on the basis of comprehensive "course files". Teachers who take over specific courses can gain a full picture about the course content, previous grades, evaluations, etc. (without referencing individual students). These course files are considered a very useful planning instrument by the expert panel.

Information to the public is provided by different channels including face to face interaction, but widely using the website of the Department. Here information regarding the programme, the course plan, the selection procedure as well as the Intended Learning Outcomes are provided. Once again it should be recognized that many aspects regarding admission requirements result from regulations that are centrally monitored and consequently equal and published by SQU.

On the long run an improved transparency regarding the qualifications gained in the different courses listed in the course plan could be helpful to increase international exchange as it makes this information available to the public reducing the need for individual requests. While this information is part of the full course files, these are quite comprehensive and not openly available to the public. Hence a description of the Intended Learning Outcomes of the courses that is available online would increase transparency and help to continue supporting the good reputation of the Department.

#### Findings:

1. Student's workload should be addressed more explicitly by the evaluation-instruments used.
2. In the Bachelor programme the course "Research Methods in Geography" should be shifted to an earlier semester.
3. In the Bachelor programme qualitative techniques and methods should play a more visible role in methodological teaching and fieldwork courses.
4. For the Master programme the link between the defined Intended Learning Outcomes and the curriculum needs to be transparently outlined. It has to be transparent how the existing curriculum guarantees the achievement of the defined competencies.
5. In the medium term the profile of the Master programme should be further developed in order to clearly outline what the qualification will be upon completion independent from individualization.
6. The number of classes taught in English should be increased in the Master programme.
7. An internship should be introduced in the Master programme.
8. The Master Thesis should be credited.

9. The assessments methods must stronger reflect critical thinking abilities also in the Bachelor programme.
10. The Department should actively take action facilitating student mobility and international exchange.
11. Standardized diploma supplements should be issued explaining the achieved qualification and the position in the Higher Education system.

## Appendix

**Visit to the Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat**  
**B.A & M.A. Geography**  
**Date: 5. to 8. March 2017**

<b>5 March – Day 1 (Sunday)</b>	
6:20 am Muscat International Airport, meet and assist and transfer to hotel	
11:30 – 13:00	Lunch (panel only) ( Hotel)
13.00	Transfer from hotel to SQU
13.30 – 14.00	Short welcome at the Geography Department
14:00 – 17:00	Internal discussion of the expert panel to prepare the site visit
17:00 – 18:30	Guided tour through the relevant parts of the campus (geography specific)
18:30	Return to hotel
Followed by	Dinner (panel only)

<b>6 March – Day 2 (Monday)</b>	
09.00	Transfer from hotel to SQU
09.30 – 10.15	Discussion with the Management of SQU
10.30 – 11.30	Discussion with the <b>University Quality and Accreditation Office</b>
11.30 – 12.45	Light Lunch
12.45 – 14.30	Discussion with CASS Deanship & Head of Geography Department
14.30 – 14.50	Break
14.50 – 16.30	Discussion with teaching staff & support staff
16.30-16:50	Break
16:50-18:00	Discussion with EMPLOYERS of graduates
18.00	Internal meeting of the panel (debrief)
18.30	Return to hotel
Followed by	Dinner

<b>7 March – Day 3 (Tuesday)</b>	
09.00	Transfer from hotel to SQU
09.30 – 10.45	Discussion with students and graduates of the programmes
10.45 – 11.45	Review of presented evidence Please have Bachelor Thesis (from very good to satisfactory) and Master Thesis (from very good to satisfactory) ready for expert review. Also provide examples for tests / exams / other student work.
11.45 – 12.45	Light working Lunch of the panel
12.45 – 13.15	OPTIONAL discussion with HoD (only used if need)
13.15 – 15.00	Internal discussion of the expert panel (experts only)
15.00 -15.30	Feedback to the Department
Starting 15.30	Social programme & joint dinner

<b>8 March - Day 4 (Wednesday)</b>	
08.30	Transfer from hotel to airport & departure of experts