

Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge
im Bereich Gesundheit und Soziales
Accreditation Agency for Study Programs
in the Area of Health and Social Sciences



Assessment Report

**for the Application of
Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Muscat, Oman,
College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS),
Department of Sociology and Social Work (DSSW)
for the Accreditation of the Study Program
Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Sociology"**

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Decision	July 25, 2017

¹ The expert listed in italics did not participate in the On-Site Visit.

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1 Introduction

The Accreditation Agency for Study Programs in Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS) is an interdisciplinary and multi-professional organization. Its mission is to evaluate Bachelor and Master programs in the fields of health and social sciences, as well as in related domains, such as medicine and healthcare. By implementing accreditation and recommendation procedures, AHPGS contributes to the improvement of the overall quality of teaching and learning. However, the higher education institutions also remain responsible for assuring quality.

Since 2004, AHPGS has been a member of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). In 2006, AHPGS joined the ENQA; in 2009, it became a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Since 2012, AHPGS has been a member of the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA). Moreover, AHPGS has been listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) since 2009.

The University states that Omani legislation allows for the University to be accredited by a foreign external organization such as the AHPGS.²

In carrying out accreditation procedures, the AHPGS follows the requirements of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In the present case, the decision regarding the accreditation of the study program is carried out by the AHPGS Accreditation Commission based on the following accreditation criteria³:

1. Program aims and learning outcomes
2. Curriculum design
3. Human resources
4. Facilities and learning resources
5. Study process and student assessment
6. Program and quality management
7. Gender equality and equal opportunities

² AOQ Overall 1, with more information available at <http://www.educouncil.gov.om/en/page.php?scrollto=start&id=46>

³ Approved by the AHPGS Accreditation Commission

The external assessment procedure is carried out in the following four steps:

I. The University's application

The AHPGS verifies the sufficiency of the documents submitted by the University, namely the self-evaluation report and its corresponding annexes, which exist to fulfill the assessment spheres as well as the AHPGS standards. As a result, the AHPGS drafts a summary (see Sections 2.1-2.4), which is to be approved by the University and subsequently made available to the expert group, together with all other documentation.

II. Written review

The main documents are reviewed by the expert group assigned by the accreditation commission of AHPGS. This is done in order to verify the compliance of the study program with the applicable accreditation criteria valid in Oman. Consequently, the experts compose a short summary regarding the study programs.

III. On-site visit (peer-review)

The experts carry out an on-site visit at the University. During this visit, discussions are held with members of the University, which include University and department administration, degree program management, instructors and students. This provides the expert group with the opportunity to learn more about the study program and furnishes it with more in-depth details than written documents alone can provide. The experts' tasks during the on-site visit are to verify and evaluate the objectives of the program and its projected study results, structure, staff, material resources, course of studies and methods of assessment (selection of students, assessment of achievements, students' support etc.). The experts also assess the efficacy of the program's management (the program administration and external assurance of study quality).

Following the on-site visit, the expert group issues an expert report. This report is based on the results of the visit, the written review of the study programs, and the documents submitted by the University. The experts then submit their report to the University, which has an opportunity to state a response opinion.

Finally, the expert report, the University's response opinion (if applicable) and all other provided documents are submitted to the accreditation commission of AHPGS.

IV. The AHPGS accreditation decision

The accreditation commission of the AHPGS examines the documentation made available in the process of application, namely the University's self-evaluation report, its annexes, the summary comprised by the AHPGS, the expert report, as well as the University's response opinion. These documents represent the basis for the commission's decision regarding the recommendation for the accreditation of the study program, the accreditation of the study program with conditions, or the denial of accreditation of the study program.

2 Overview

2.1 Procedure-related documents

The Sultan Qaboos University of Oman delegated the task of accrediting its Master of Arts study program “Sociology” to AHPGS.

The self-evaluation report for accreditation⁴ of the aforementioned study program (hereinafter the Self-Evaluation Report or SER) of the Sultan Qaboos University (hereinafter the University) was submitted to the Accreditation Agency for Study Programs in the Area of Health and Social Science (AHPGS e.V.) in electronic format on October 17, 2016.

On March 14, 2017, the AHPGS forwarded the open questions and explanatory notes (hereinafter OQ) pertaining to the Application for accreditation for the study program to the University. On March 21, 2017, the University submitted the answers to the open questions and explanatory notes (hereinafter AOQ) to the AHPGS in electronic format.

This document presents AHPGS’ summary of the Master of Arts study program “Sociology”. The program’s first cohort was admitted in 1992.

The application documentation submitted by the Sultan Qaboos University follows the outline recommended by the AHPGS. Along with the application request towards accreditation of the Master study program “Sociology,” the following additional documents can be found in the application package (the documents submitted by the University are numbered in the following order for easier referencing):

Specific documents for the study program M.A. “Sociology”:

Annex	Description
1	Course Descriptions
2	Teachers’ CVs

⁴ In this instance, accreditation without the awarding of the official seal of the Accreditation Council of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programs in Germany

Alongside the study-program-specific documents, the following documents pertain to all study program submitted for external evaluation:

Annex	Description
A	Undergraduate Academic Regulations
B	Acronyms
C	Congruence between University, College and Department
D	University - College - Department - Program Vision Mission Objectives
E	Postgraduate Academic Regulations
F	Disabilities Guide
G	Exam Instructions for Students with Disabilities
H	Program Accreditation Roadmap - SQU
I	Program Accreditation Roadmap - CASS
J	Internship Agreement (example)

The Summary, the Expert Report as well as the decision of the Accreditation Commission build the basis for the present Assessment Report.

2.2 Study program

2.2.1 Structural data

Figure 1: Structural Overview	
University	Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Muscat, Oman
Faculty	College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS)
Department	Department of Sociology and Social Work (DSSW)
Title of the study program	"Sociology"
Cooperation partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ministry of Social Development - Ministry of Education Ministry of Health - Ministry of Defense - NGOs and civil society institutions <p>An example cooperation agreement was provided by email by the University on March 21, 2017.</p>
Degree awarded	Master of Arts (M.A.)
Form of studies	Full-time or part-time
Language of study	Arabic

Period of education	4 semesters (2 years) for full time students 6 semesters (3 years) for part time students Both of these consist of 2 semesters (1 year) of thesis work; before this, part-time students take 6 credits per week for 60 weeks, and full-time students take 12 credits per week for 30 weeks. Thus the study plan is the same. ⁵
Credit Points (CP) according to the Credit Hour model	24 CP
Hours/CP	1 contact hour per CP The following workload estimates were calculated assuming 2 self-study hours per contact hour.
Workload ⁶	Total: 2,910 hours Contact hours: 360 hours Individual work: 720 hours Master thesis work: 1,830 hours
CP for the final paper	0 ⁷
Launch date of the study program	Academic year 1992/1993 (stopped from 1997 until 2004, primarily due to a dearth in B.A. Sociology graduates) ⁸
First accreditation	Program has not yet been accredited
Time of admission	Each fall semester
Number of available places on the program	10
Admission requirements	In general, to enroll in the M.A. "Sociology" program, students must <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hold a Bachelor degree from a recognized university in a relevant field, during the coursework of which a cumulative GPA not less than 2.75 was attained (2.5 with adequate supplemental work experience or special academic qualifications); - pass a written admission exam; and - demonstrate English proficiency. Successful applicants are granted either Unconditional Admission or Conditional Admission.
Tuition fees	For Omani students: 75 OMR (195 USD; 180 EUR) per credit hour

⁵ AOO M.A. "Sociology" 1

⁶ Ibid. 2

⁷ Ibid. 3

⁸ Ibid. 4

	<p>700 OMR (1,820 USD; 1,710 EUR) thesis cost 2,500 OMR (6,500 USD; 6,110 EUR) total for 24 CP and thesis</p> <p>For international students: 105 OMR (270 USD; 250 EUR) per credit hour 980 OMR (2,550 USD; 2,400 EUR) thesis cost 3,500 OMR (9,030 USD; 8,500 EUR) total for 24 CP and thesis</p> <p>Bridging courses cost 40 OMR (100 USD; 95 EUR) per credit hour, for all students</p>
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2.2.2 Qualification objectives and employment opportunities

The University stated that its overall educational objective for its M.A. "Sociology" program is producing graduates who are highly qualified in social research who are prepared for careers in domestic social welfare institutions and who can operate within a framework of societal and professional values and standards.

Regarding career goals and opportunities, the University mentions that most of its students in the M.A. "Sociology" program are already employed on a part- or full-time basis, but that a Master's degree would help distinguish them in their fields when competing for employment opportunities.

The University forecasts that, in 5 years' time, a Master's degree in Sociology will provide promising career opportunities. This is based on the assertions that (1) the labor market is not yet saturated with Master's degrees; (2) attainment of the degree usually entails some form of social research background; (3) scholarships are available from government institutions to obtain a Master's degree which guarantee a job after graduation; and (4) in the past, the Department has secured positions for its graduates at various government institutions.

Most graduates, according to the University, become social researchers in domestic institutions such as the Ministries of Social Development, Interior, Education, Health, and Police and Armed Forces, while others find work at other academic institutions, research centers or NGOs, or become self-

employed. A common job title for graduates of the program is Social Researcher.⁹

2.2.3 Modularization and exam system

The program comprises 9 courses, of which 8 are obligatory and 1 is an elective course (from a selection of 3). Each course is worth 3 CP, with the exception of the thesis course, which is worth 0 CP. 4 courses are offered in the fall semester and 6 are offered in spring, plus the thesis course, which is offered in both.

No.	Title	Sem.	CP
SOCY6110	Advanced Approaches in Social Research	1	3
SOCY6130	English Readings in Sociology & Social Work	1	3
SOCY6150	Advanced Social Statistics	1	3
SOCY6170	Civil Society Organization	1	3
SOCY6220	Modern and Contemporary Sociological Theories	2	3
SOCY6240	Applied Sociology	2	3
SOCY6260	New Trends and Fields in Sociology	2	3
SOCY6222	<i>Social Policy and Planning (Elective)</i>	2	3
SOCY6224	<i>Sociology of Culture (Elective)</i>	2	3
SOCY6226	<i>Human Development (Elective)</i>	2	3
SOCY7001	Thesis	3-4	0
Total Offered CP:			30

The course catalog for the M.A. "Sociology" program contains information on

- the course title and number;
- semester in which the course is offered,
- the year in which the course should be taken,
- breakdown of credit hours, lecture hours and self-study hours,
- the language of instruction,
- whether the course satisfies a requirement or an elective,
- learning outcomes and objectives of the course, and

⁹ Ibid. 6

- methods of teaching and assessment.

All aforementioned courses are offered solely within the Department of Sociology and Social Work and are thus not shared with the rest of the University.

All classes (with the exception of SOCY7001, the thesis course) use lectures as their primary means of conveying information and assess students by through assignments, presentations and written examinations.

In the **first semester** of the M.A. "Sociology" program, students take four required courses for a total of 12 CP. In "Advanced Approaches in Social Research," students gain an advanced understanding of principles and parameters of sociological scientific methods and knowledge by designing data collection instruments and writing polished social research reports. In "English Readings in Sociology & Social Work," students continue the study of English texts that was introduced in the seventh semester of the B.A. "Sociology" program. In "Advanced Social Statistics," students master data analysis through derived statistical methods and practice implementing them correctly. Finally, in "Civil Society Organization," students examine the roots of civil society and traditional patterns of organization, especially in contexts relevant to Oman.

In the **second semester** of the program, students take three required courses and select one elective from three options (listed respectively), for a total of 12 CP. In "Modern and Contemporary Sociological Theories," students learn the theoretical bases of sociology, especially in structuralist, functionalist and conflict-theoretic schools of thought. In "Applied Sociology," students apply what they have learned to real, current and relevant sociological issues in Omani society. In "New Trends and Fields in Sociology," the momentum of the field is taught, showing students the most recent paths of expansion that sociology has taken, again encouraging real-world practical implementation. Students then choose an elective from one of three courses: "Social Policy and Planning," "Sociology of Culture" and "Human Development."

The **third and fourth semesters** of the M.A. "Sociology" program are devoted entirely to the composition and defense of the Master thesis. No CP are awarded for this; the University states that a primary reason for this is that it mandates that all credit points be linked to a verifiable amount of work, and

that students' varying levels of effort in working on their theses makes the assignment ineligible for credit points.¹⁰

The University makes use of an online academic infrastructure program, SIS, that allows students to comprehensively administer and view information about their studies. Additionally, "Moodle" is used as an online learning platform. The University states that it provides a training program for faculty and students to help them increase their technological literacy and skills. Teaching staff maintain personal teaching websites to which they upload their lecture notes, articles and reading materials for students to access.

Internships and work placements are not included in the curriculum for the degree of M.A. "Sociology."

The University states that it holds a wider vision of providing graduates with internationally recognized competences, and that the Department of Sociology and Social Work shares this vision. Hence, the curriculum for M.A. "Sociology" was stated to have been developed according to professional standards of the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association, as well as academic standards set by the Universities of Chicago, Manchester and Ain Shams, amongst others. The language of instruction for the M.A. "Sociology" degree is Arabic, though understanding of English texts is encouraged through a specialized course and by encouraging faculty to present texts in the English language.

The University offers three different opportunities for M.A. "Sociology" students to study at a different host institution for a period of time, though specific details must be ascertained on a case-by-case basis. These opportunities consist of (1) a short-term visit, during which a student spends a research period of up to one semester and which requires no formal agreement; (2) a long-term visit, during which a student spends half the duration of the Master program at a host institution, generally requiring a letter of agreement from the deans of both universities; and (3) a joint-badging degree, during which a student registers at both SQU and the host institutions, spends a significant amount of time at the host institution but at least half the time at the home institution, and receives the degree of M.A. "Sociology" conferred by both universities jointly.

¹⁰ Ibid. 3

According to the University, instructors in the M.A. "Sociology" program often link their curricula to their past and ongoing commissioned studies; two courses in particular ("Advanced Approaches in Social Research" and "Advanced Social Statistics and Applied Sociology") serve to hone students' research familiarity through direct exposure, before they have their own abilities evaluated through their theses. Additionally, the College states that it encourages graduate students' involvement in research activities (workshops, conferences etc.) and studies, including those conducted by faculty.

The University states that it uses a series of assessment strategies to ensure the skill-based effectiveness of its courses' teaching and learning methods.

Students take eight exams per semester (four midterms and four finals) and sixteen in total. (Part-time students take four exams per semester – two midterms and two finals.)¹¹ The exact timing of each course's exams is determined and announced by the Deanship for Admission and Registration at the beginning of each semester.

Candidates who do not pass an examination may resit it once, restricted to a time window of between 3 and 6 months after the date of the original exam. Should they fail a second time, a third resit is not permitted.

The University states that decisions regarding the compensation of students with disabilities are made on the department level on a case-by-case basis. Further regulations regarding the rights of disabled students are defined in the in CASS' "Guide to Students with disabilities" (Annex F) and in the "Instructions for the Participants in Supervising the Exams of Students with Disabilities and in Filling their Exam Answer Sheets" (Annex G).

Students may transfer up to 50% of the credits required for their degree program to SQU from another institution, as long as the credits in question have not been used as part of another degree. The department board has the responsibility of ensuring equivalency of credits; coursework to be transferred must meet the following criteria¹².

- Approval has been granted by the department board and the Deanship of Postgraduate Studies.

¹¹ Ibid. 8

¹² Annex E: Postgraduate Regulations, §2.3

- The application for transfer credits has been submitted during the Add/Drop period of each semester.
- The coursework has been done at a recognized university or equivalent institution.
- The coursework is shown on an official transcript.
- The coursework was completed no more than 3 years prior to admission at SQU.
- The coursework was passed with a "B" grade or better.
- The coursework is equivalent to coursework in the SQU program.

Credits earned by correspondence do not qualify for transfer. When students receive transfer credit, it counts toward their degree requirements, but is not included in the calculation of their cumulative GPA.

2.2.4 Admission requirements

The University states that students are admitted to the M.A. "Sociology" program based on their academic merit, which includes a strong personal academic history, proficiency in the language of instruction and the potential for success in advanced study. In order to select the best students, the Department of Sociology and Social Work requires that, for admittance to the M.A. "Sociology" program, students must

- Have a 2.75 or higher cumulative GPA for their Bachelor coursework;
- Pass a written exam;
- Display professional values and skills;
- Show personal and professional competence in an interview, and
- Have work experience.

The University maintains that these requirements serve to achieve and assure quality in its M.A. "Sociology" program by ensuring a high level of professionalism and experience in its students.

Students who do not qualify for unconditional admission through the meeting of all criteria, but hold other credentials or experience (e.g. thorough work history, etc.) may be considered for conditional admission, pending their completion of other requirements.

2.3 Study conditions and quality assurance

2.3.1 Human resources

The University states that the maximum enrollment for each cohort of the M.A. "Sociology" program is 10 students. There are 2 full professors in the program, as well as 4 assistant professors who teach courses and 11 assistant professors who supervise theses, all holding a PhD.¹³¹⁴

The general workload for all staff was given as 12 hours per week, plus 10 hours per week for thesis supervisors.¹⁵

There are two main coordinators in the M.A. "Sociology" program. One is a study program coordinator, usually the Head of Department and a full professor; the other is a quality assurance and accreditation coordinator, a faculty member.

The University states that it encourages its faculty to regularly attend training and professional development workshops, both within and outside of the University. These cover research, pedagogical methods and literacy with technology; the University covers all transportation, accommodation and registration fees for its faculty members' participation in conferences which augment their teaching and research abilities.

2.3.2 Facilities

Within CASS and the Department, available facilities include

- classrooms of various size, accommodating between 15 and 50 students and featuring a whiteboard, overhead projector, LCD projector and computer; certain classrooms also contain TVs and DVD players;
- seminar rooms, including one in the Department and one in CASS;
- offices for the Head of Department and Coordinator; all professors share their offices with one other colleague; the extension of the CASS building is scheduled in the University's five year operational plan 2016-2020 in order to add more space to professors' offices;

¹³ Ibid. 9

¹⁴ Annex 2

¹⁵ Ibid.

- computer laboratories with academic software, totaling 7 around campus including 4 in the student dormitories (open from 8am until midnight); certified on-site IT support is available, as is campus-wide Wi-Fi access; and
- a specialized technology laboratory for students with special needs, featuring devices such as Braille printers, support software etc. which help visually impaired students.

Students have access to further University facilities including libraries, residences with gender-segregated sport facilities, accommodation for students with special needs, recreational facilities and a mosque. The largest lecture hall has a capacity of 5,000.

The University states that it has a non-discrimination policy for disabled students, as do the College and Department, and has adapted most of its facilities to be accessible to disabled students. The College also works to provide its course materials in Braille through the use of assistive technology.

The main University Library contains a total of 359,788 books, 40,356 periodicals and 1,323,847 theses,¹⁶ as well as access to 37 databases, of which approximately 25 are relevant for the field of Social Work. It is reasonably accessible to students during semesters, and is open 24 hours during examination weeks.

CASS also maintains its own library, specialized in the Arts and Humanities and containing about 11,000 books categorized using the Library of Congress catalog.

Each department does not have a specific budget; rather, they submit financial requests to their requisite Colleges, which allocate funding at their discretion.

In addition to University Deanships, the University states that its offices of Public Relations and Information, Procurement, Legal Affairs, Administration Affairs, Personnel Affairs, Technical Affairs, Financial Affairs, Projects and Maintenance, Housing, University Print Shop and Planning and Statistics provide administrative university services and, when relevant, assist students.

¹⁶ These totals include both printed and electronic media.

2.3.3 Quality assurance

The College has taken the following organizational steps to assure quality assurance within its programs.

- Establishment of a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC);
- Establishment of a Quality Assurance and Accreditation unit which belongs to the Dean's assistant of Undergraduate Studies;
- Establishment of a Student-Department Liaison Committee;
- Extension of the CASS building in order to create a positive working environment;
- A training plan for e-learning course design to foster the deployment of e-learning in CASS;
- A common course portfolio template and online data warehouse for archiving documents; and
- Adoption of a Departmental Quality Assurance Action Plan which lists the department Periodic Activities to be done to assure adherence to quality standards.

Within CASS, the QAAC is responsible at the highest level for monitoring of all quality assurance and accreditation issues. QAAC's role is to advise and support departments to ensure congruence of quality and processes with the University's mission and strategies. From top to bottom, the oversight hierarchy for quality assurance is the QAAC, Deans, Assistant Deans for Undergraduate Studies, Rapporteurs, Officers, Heads of Department, Department Accreditation Members and the Department Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee.

The M.A. "Sociology" program assures its quality by the following means:

- The program's accreditation committee confers with CASS' Quality Assurance unit for all quality assurance measures;
- Each course has a delegated coordinator who is responsible for ensuring that the major course objectives are congruent with the objectives of the program, department, college and University
- Assessment methods measure the objective achievement of all courses. These methods include course specification and reports, as well as surveys conducted on students, alumni, and employees.

Course evaluation is done “as a continuing process”; one of the course instructors is duly nominated as a coordinator thereof, with clearly defined duties and responsibilities. Each course’s file is inspected by an ad hoc group formed from the CASS Quality Assurance Committee for content, assessment methods and compliance with learning objectives. Final examinations are compiled by course coordinators from model question papers prepared by the respective instructors. At the end of each course, course coordinators unify and summarize the course reports, used to analyze course strengths and weaknesses. Student feedback is also taken into account through online surveys and through interviews with the student-based Liaison Committee. This committee consists of the HoD, a Sociology faculty member, a Social Work faculty member, two Sociology students (male and female) and two Social Work students (male and female).¹⁷

The Department Board is furnished with recommendations made from analyzed feedback from graduate students (variously employed), their employers, the Advisory Committee, student surveys, alumni surveys and supervisors for internships (field training). An action plan is then prepared by the Board.

For more information, refer to the University’s Quality Assurance Roadmap (Annex H).

Student workload is evaluated by the Department at the end of each semester; students’ cumulative GPAs are used as indicators of difficulty in terms of content and workload.

Each year from 2011 to 2014, seven students enrolled in the M.A. “Sociology” program; in 2015, ten students enrolled. The University states that dropping out of the M.A. “Sociology” program is rare, and has only occurred in the past when a student failed to complete the thesis; in this case, the student simply received a postgraduate diploma attesting to the completion of 24 credits.¹⁸ Two students dropped out of the M.A. “Sociology” program so far.

To guarantee academic feasibility, students under academic probation are monitored and assessed by a special committee, which reports its findings to the Department Board so that an action plan can be formulated. Students are assigned an academic advisor, who can provide tailored assistance to stu-

¹⁷ AOQ Overall 10

¹⁸ AOQ M.A. “Sociology” 7

dents as necessary. All students may register online but students under probation have to visit their advisor in order to register and to discuss the courses that should be taken (again). Furthermore, the University states that the appropriateness of students' workload is assessed through student course surveys and periodic reviews of course materials.¹⁹

According to the University, students are provided with a full orientation of departments in CASS and continuing, consistent support in the form of academic counseling. Promoting an open-door policy, heads of department and other College members can be approached outside of office hours if necessary. Other offices and programs provide various forms of student support, including the Language Center, the Center for Career Guidance and the hosting of Annual Career Days.

Students have constant access to an online portal through the Deanship of Admission and Registration which provides them with complete details of academic requirements, their academic performance and attained credit hours, attendance statistics and a full academic plan. This portal facilitates course selection, registration or deregistration, auditing of study plan and schedule, and the retrieval of information about grades and cumulative GPA. Information regarding counseling, faculty office hours etc. is also furnished. Students with disabilities are informed of special procedures and compensation measures in documents pertaining to students with disabilities²⁰.

The University states that SQU applies an equal-opportunity policy, including the admission policy; male and female students are not segregated academically and enjoy the same rights, privileges and opportunities. According to the University, parents, foreign exchange students, students with an immigrant background, people from educationally deprived backgrounds and other traditionally discriminated groups are all afforded equality of opportunity.²¹

Since 1997, the College has admitted increasing numbers of disabled students and has ensured their support through the establishment of a Special Needs Technology Laboratory, which furnishes disabled students with computers, Braille printers and other specialized devices for visually impaired students.

¹⁹ AOQ Overall 7

²⁰ Annex F: Guide to Students with Disabilities; Annex G:

Instructions for the Participants in Supervising the Exams of Students with Disabilities and in Filling their Exam Answer Sheets

²¹ AOQ Overall 17

2.4 Information about the University

The Sultan Qaboos University, situated in the Al-Khodh neighborhood of the city of Muscat, was founded in 1986 with five Colleges (Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science) and grew in 1987, 1993, 2006 and 2008 with the respective additions of the Colleges of Arts and Social Sciences, Commerce and Economics, Law and Nursing.²² Until 2000, the Sultan Qaboos University was the only university in Oman and is today the only public university in Oman, besides five private universities.

At present there are 17,824 students at the University, of whom 9,359 (52.5%) are female and 8,465 (47.5%) are male. Of these students, 1,543 (8.7%) are enrolled in graduate programs.

In total, the University offers 64 Bachelor degree programs, 62 Master programs and 34 doctoral programs. Since inception, the University has awarded 37,032 Bachelor degrees, 1,826 MDs, 4,241 Diplomas, 2,281 Master degrees and 28 doctorates.

Research is stated as being one of the core features of the University. It has established ten research centers in various scientific and humanities fields and holds three research chairs: the UNESCO Chair in Marine Biotechnology, the Shell Chair in Carbonate Geosciences and the Chair in Nanotechnology for Water Desalination. Up to 2014, the University undertook 1,810 research projects with a total value of OMR 46 million (USD \$119 million; EUR €111 million). Since 1995, the University has also marketed consulting services to various private and public sector organizations on 453 occasions with a budget of over OMR 17.6 million (\$46 million; €43 million). The number of University journal articles increased 185% between 2000 and 2013 up to 1,193 in the latter year, while journal articles saw an increase of 188% over the same time period, increasing to 728.

The University mechanizes research funds and leave, conference attendance, sabbatical leave, research awards and journal publication awards in order to incentivize its faculties to engage in research. Additionally, the College of Arts and Social Sciences publishes its own academic journal and hosts a biennial academic conference.

²² SER B.A. "Social Work" p.50 §3,1,1

The College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) is the University's largest college, having been formed in 1987, one year after the founding of the main University. It contains eleven Bachelor programs, nine Master programs (including M.A. "Social Work") and three doctoral programs.

The Department of Sociology and Social Work was established in 1987 and currently hosts 410 students per cohort. There are 24 programs of study within the College of Arts and Social Sciences of which 4 belong to the Department (B.A./M.A. "Sociology"/"Social Work," respectively).

The study program M.A. "Sociology" commenced in academic year 1992/1993; however, it was out of operation between the years of 1997 and 2004 due to a dearth of B.A. "Sociology" graduates. The program was reopened in 2004 in response to a government ministry's request for further education for its employees.

The Department and College seek to integrate complex systems instruction and more advanced learning approaches/technologies into their future development, in accordance with its "clear and articulated strategic plan" for the years 2016-2040.

3 Expert Report

3.1 Preliminary remarks

The Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences (hereinafter, the AHPGS) was commissioned by the decision of Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman (hereinafter also referred to as "the University") for the accreditation of the Master study program "Sociology," which offers the degree Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Sociology," as well as for the following study programs:

- the Bachelor program "Sociology," which offers the degree Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in "Sociology";
- the Bachelor program "Social Work," which offers the degree Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in "Social Work"; and
- the Master program "Social Work," which offers the degree Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Social Work."

The on-site visit of the Master study program "Sociology," as well as of the Master program "Social Work" and the Bachelor programs "Social Work" and "Sociology," all of which are offered at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman, was carried out on April 10 and 11, 2017.

The documents submitted by the University, the feedback from the experts on these documents and the results of the discussions with University representatives during the on-site visit serve as bases for the statements made in this expert report.

The following experts were appointed by the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS for the evaluation of the aforementioned study program.

As representatives of higher education institutions and professional practice:

Prof. Petra Deger²³

Professor of Sociology, Heidelberg University of Education, Germany

Prof. Dr. Andreas Geiger

Former Rector and Professor of Sociology and Community Medicine,
Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences, Germany

²³ Italicized experts did not take part in the On-Site Visit.

Dr. Rolf Heusser, MPH

Director, National Institute for Cancer Epidemiology and Registration, Zürich, Switzerland

Prof. Dr. Christine Meyer

Professor of Social Work, University of Vechta, Germany

Prof. Dr. Martina Ritter

Professor of Social Work and Social Management, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Prof. Dr. Peter Schäfer

Professor of Family and Youth Welfare Law in the Context of Social Work, Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences, Mönchengladbach, Germany

As a student representative:

Mr. Alexander Bordan

Student, University of Bonn, Germany

The experts' on-site visit was carried out in accordance with the *Criteria for the assessment and accreditation procedures of study programs at foreign higher education institutions*, which were developed by the AHPGS in close accordance both with the existing criteria and requirements valid in the Federal Republic of Germany and the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG), established by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). After the announcement of the accreditation decision, the expert report will be published as part of the final Assessment Report.

3.2 Basic information about the study program

The main objective of the Master study program "Sociology" is the production of graduates who are highly qualified in social research, who are prepared for careers in governmental bodies and research institutions in order to analyze, understand and interpret social phenomena in Oman, and who can identify social problems and develop concepts for a well-functioning society.

The study program requires the obtainment of 24 credit points (CP) according to the credit hour system. One credit point is equal to one contact hour every week for one semester. Every contact hour requires an estimated 2 hours of self-study time. The total workload of the program constitutes 2,910 hours, of which 360 are contact hours, 720 are individual work hours and 1,830 hours are spent researching and composing the Master thesis.

The Master study program "Sociology" can be formatted as a full-time or part-time program, with a regular full-time duration of four semesters (two years) and a regular part-time duration of six semesters (three years). The final year in both formats is dedicated to writing the Master thesis. The program consists of nine courses, of which seven are required, one is an elective (chosen from a selection of three) and one is a thesis course. All courses are one semester in duration, with the exception of the thesis course, which runs for two semesters.

The admission requirements for the Master study program "Sociology" include a Bachelor degree in a relevant field with a 2.75 or better cumulative grade point average (CGPA), successfully passing the admission exam and the interview with department officials, and an adequate demonstration of English proficiency. Students pay tuition fees for the Master study program "Sociology" per credit hour; Omani and non-Omani students pay different rates. There are approximately ten study places available annually in the program; admission takes place each fall semester. Upon completion of the study program, graduates are awarded the academic title "Master of Arts in Sociology." The Master program was initially founded in 1992. The first cohort of the Master study program "Sociology," as it exists now, was admitted in 2011; since then, 45 students have enrolled, 27 have graduated and 2 have dropped out.

3.3 Expert Report

On February 13, 2017, the application documents of the University were made available to the expert group for written evaluation. The expert group assessed the Master study program "Sociology" based on the abovementioned *Criteria for the assessment and accreditation procedures of study programs at foreign higher education institutions*.

The on-site visit was carried out on April 10-11, 2017, according to the previously agreed-upon schedule. Representatives of AHPGS accompanied the expert group.

The expert group met on April 9, 2017 for preliminary talks in preparation for the on-site visit. They discussed the submitted application documents and the results of the written evaluation as well as the arisen questions. Furthermore, they prepared the plan for the on-site visit at the University.

In the course of the on-site visit, the experts held discussions with the University management, representatives of the College of Arts and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology and Social Work, and the teaching staff of the Master study program "Sociology," as well as with students currently studying in the program. Furthermore, they inspected the learning premises, including the library.

This expert report is structured in compliance with the accreditation criteria of the AHPGS, as approved by the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS on September 30, 2015. The study program will be described and analyzed in a comprehensive manner below. The documents submitted by the University, the experts' feedback on the documents, the observations made during the on-site visit, and the results of discussions with the representatives of the University, the College of Arts and Social Sciences, the Department of Sociology and Social Work and with the students serve as the bases for the statements made in the expert report.

3.3.1 Program aims and their implementation

The study program pursues specific and clearly defined professional qualification objectives. The program aims to deepen the sociological expertise of the students. The students should become capable of handling social phenomena and problems with efficiency and advanced scientific capacity by discovering and knowing about the causes and mechanisms of emerging social problems caused by social change. Thus, they may effectively contribute to the development and progress of societies. The students are empowered with social guidance skills in order to contribute to the continuity of a well-functioning societal structure and to uphold a readiness to respond to the needs of social research in all sectors of the Omani society. Graduates of the program can operate within a framework of societal and professional values and standards.

The Master study program "Sociology," extending the competences given to holders of the University's B.A. "Sociology" degree, focuses on social research and the constant readiness to respond to the needs and demands of scientific social research and consultancy in all sectors of Omani society and its institutions. Most of the students enrolled in the Master study program "Sociology" are already employed, and the completion of the Master's degree will help to distinguish them from others in their fields when competing for employment opportunities.

The experts affirm that the graduates of the Master study program "Sociology" are prepared to work in academic environments, NGOs, research organizations, self-employed capacities and, most often, in various Ministries of the Omani government, including those of Social Development, Health and Police and Armed Forces. The advanced credential offered through completion of the Master program "Sociology" is partially purposed to give its holders a competitive qualification in the workplace. The University has stated that retention of its graduates in the Omani society is very important for the process of Omanization, and education in areas of sociology unique to Oman encourages this.

In general, the experts had the impression of a significant and proportional study program during their on-site visit at the University. The Master program "Sociology" focuses on specific qualification objectives. These objectives cover both professional and interdisciplinary aspects and refer in particular to the domain of academic competences.

During the on-site visit at the University, the experts were provided with more information regarding specific qualification objectives and how these prepare students for specific future employment capacities and situations. It became obvious that the study program's qualification objectives have been developed in accordance with the overall strategy of the University - that is, to support the process of Omanization, meaning the retention of graduates in the Omani society and the encouragement to develop their social and cultural heritage. However, the program's representatives clarify that the program has both a local and a global focus. The study program strives to reflect international standards, perspectives and practices in sociology in order to give its students an adequate global background and to develop Oman's ability to work on solving its social issues by means of educated professionals.

Most enrollees in the Master study program "Sociology" are holders of the University's B.A. "Sociology" degree and have thus already completed all requisite University requirements.

Moreover, the University showed its strong commitment to the personal development and social responsibility of the students. It is also committed to the enhancement of independent thinking and a comprehensive awareness which enables the students to make informed and socially responsible choices in agreement with their academic, professional and life goals. By being qualified to identify and analyze social problems, the experts point out the chance to

develop an Omani sociology that meets the particular needs of the Omani society.

Thus, in sight of both the professional development objectives and the measures taken to encourage students' social awareness and citizenship which can be found within the structure of the Master program "Sociology," the experts consider the requirements of the criterion to be fulfilled.

3.3.2 Structure of the study program

Students' achievement of the degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Sociology" is contingent on the completion of 24 CP and a Master thesis.

Full-time students complete the program in four semesters (two years). Part-time students complete the program in six semesters (three years). For both groups, the final year is devoted entirely to the thesis work. Therefore, part-time students take classes at half the pace of the full-time students.

The Master study program "Sociology" consists of eleven courses. Of these, there are six mandatory courses, one elective course (from a selection of three program-specific courses) and a compulsory thesis course. All courses are completed within one semester, except the thesis course, which runs for one year. The University's calculation of student workload includes an estimated two personal self-study hours per contact hour of class; thus, the overall workload is estimated to be 2,910 hours, including 1,830 hours of work pertaining to the thesis. The experts find that this is an adequate workload for the degree of Master of Arts. Nonetheless, in order to facilitate transfers into/out of Oman, as well as potential postgraduate studies at European universities, the experts suggest presenting the applied credit point system in ECTS units in order to reflect students' workload more accurately. The Master diploma should be supplemented by a diploma supplement containing a conversion to the European Credit Transfer System.

In comparison to the Bachelor study program "Sociology," Master students do not attend any further University or College requirement courses, but rather focus on program-specific issues, training advanced research skills on one hand (in e.g. "Advanced Approaches in Social Research," "English Readings in Sociology and Social Work" and "Advanced Social Statistics"), and widening the students' perspectives in order to complement the often already existing professional experience on the other ("Modern and Contemporary Sociological

Theories", "Civil Society Organization" or "New Trends and Fields in Sociology") up to qualifying the students for leading and managing positions. These courses are supplemented by an elective course according to personal interests of the student and the course "Applied Sociology" in order to build upon the applied sociological approach of the Bachelor study program "Sociology." The experts value the new and modern approach of an "Applied Sociology", also through the close neighborhood to the "Social Work" programs at the College. Thus, the experts encourage the University to further develop and foster this approach and to implement it not solely through methods but also through designed contents.

Generally, the experts conclude that the combination and succession of the courses are consistent with the intended learning outcomes. Altogether, in the experts' opinion, the courses sufficiently teach students the expertise and professional skills necessary to legitimately hold the degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Sociology". The study program provides students with specialized and interdisciplinary knowledge as well as empowers them with highly professional, methodological and general competences. The degree program builds upon the sociological foundation laid in students' undergraduate degree work. The content and organization of the modules are consistent with the intended learning outcomes of the study program. The program's curriculum and its qualification objectives comply with the requirements of the higher education level. The sequence of courses provides students with a developed mastery of the theory and application of sociology before building further thereon with specialized sociological topics, techniques and modern developments.

Not least through the talks with the very involved students, the experts concluded that the study program is student-centered and encourages students to take an active role in creating the education process. However, the experts support the students' wish to reduce the presence of classical teaching methods, instead favoring interactive didacticism.

A major facet of the Department of Sociology and Social Work which is evident in the Master program "Sociology" is the existence and maintenance of cooperation agreements with various institutions. These include organizations where students can carry out their field work (internships) under professional supervision, as well as organizations in which graduates of the program often work. The University's cooperation partners relevant to the Master program

“Sociology” include NGOs, civil society institutions and the Omani government Ministries of Social Development, Education, Health and Defense.

From the experts’ point of view, the requirements of the criterion are fulfilled.

3.3.3 Admission and Feasibility

Admission to the Master study program “Sociology” is done once annually and includes a review of qualifications. Students must indicate their preference for study format (full-time or part-time) and alleviate any bureaucratic or clerical restrictions, for example those imposed by employers, at the time of application.

To be admitted to the Master study program “Sociology” **unconditionally**, students must hold an undergraduate degree in a relevant field from a recognized higher education institution, during the coursework of which a GPA of 2.50 or better (on a 4-point scale) was attained. Moreover, applicants must prove a minimum English proficiency and complete an in-person interview.

Students are admitted **conditionally** when they hold an undergraduate degree with a GPA of 2.50 or better but have not satisfied some of the admission requirements (e.g. language tests, verification procedures, etc.). These applicants are given a specified period to fulfill these requirements.

The admission procedure and requirements of the study program Master “Sociology” comply with the University’s Postgraduate Academic Regulations and, thus, are properly documented and made publicly available. Students are ranked by their undergraduate grades (as shown on their Bachelor degree, accompanying transcript or similar document from the Sultan Qaboos University or other recognized HEI) as well as by their performance in any previous postgraduate programs, if applicable. A maximum of ten students are admitted to the Master study program “Sociology” each year. The program is open to Omani citizens and nationals of “brotherly and friendly countries” (members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League, and some Asian nations) and children of non-Omani University staff. Students pay tuition fees in accordance with their nationality; international students pay more to complete the program. Overall, the experts find the admission requirements to be proportional to the scope and objectives of the study program and in compliance with the overall strategy of the University.

The experts appreciate that the College of Arts and Social Sciences, although being the only college at Sultan Qaboos University to do so, admits disabled students to its programs. On site, the experts were impressed about how the College accommodates the special needs of disabled students, providing them with supportive technology and making sure that lectures take place in barrier-free rooms.

The experts have determined that the University assesses the feasibility of its curriculum and its examinations. Course surveys are conducted on students every semester, and the feedback obtained from them is used to make improvements.

Compared to European standards for examination systems, the experts determine the presence of a relatively high amount of exams to be passed during the first two semesters as there are up to four midterm and four final exams in every course (respectively two midterm and two final exams for part-time students). However, students asked during the on-site visit said that they consider the workload, the amount of examinations and the examination cycle to be appropriate. The type as well as the timing of the different examinations is defined and communicated to the students transparently at the beginning of each course. In compensation, there are no exams to be passed in the last year of the program as there is solely the Master thesis to be elaborated.

In case of personal or health problems, the University provides a Student Counseling Center and a Health Clinic.

The experts conclude that students are provided with superb and intense academic and social support and guidance required for the accomplishment of the program-related assignments. The experts confirm that the feasibility of the study program is guaranteed, the amount of student workload is appropriate and, as a whole, the organization of the education process and the support given to the students ensure the successful implementation of the study program.

From the experts' point of view, the requirements of the criterion are fulfilled.

3.3.4 Examination system and transparency

The University uses a continuous assessment process to ensure the quality of education for its students and graduates. This is achieved by evaluating the

performance of the student through a series of exams and tests that are scheduled during the academic semester in the faculties.

There are a total of nine examinations in the entire study program, including the Master thesis. Although all examinations, except the Master thesis, take place in the first (two for part-time students) years of the study program, the experts have found that students must pass a reasonable number of exams to complete the program.

In order to contribute to a further profiling of the study program, the experts recommend implementing and extending the possibility for the design of individual assessment methods (instead of a standard test) that may refer to the students' professional life, e.g. the development of a participation concept and its implementation in the respective field of work.

The experts have determined that the thesis is an important staple of the program; however, they suggest to indicate credits for the Master thesis in order to more accurately reflect the supposed students' workload and to ease the possibility of transfers into/out of Oman, as well as potential postgraduate studies at European universities.

Each course has a midterm and a final examination, resulting in a total of eight exams (four per semester for full-time students; two for part-time students), not including the thesis. These exams, and all other coursework, are graded using a letter grade and GPA (grade point average) scale. An A, or 4.0, is a perfect result; a D, or 1.0, is the minimum passing grade, and an F, or 0.0, denotes a failed course. Students' final GPA in each course is multiplied with the number of credit points (CP) of that course, and then all these products are added together and divided by the total number of attempted (passed or failed) credit points. The result is a Cumulative GPA (CGPA), which serves as students' primary indicator of performance. Master and doctoral students at the University are required to maintain a minimum CGPA of 3.00; if they fail to do so, they can be placed on academic probation or asked to withdraw.

Students who miss or fail exams may not retake them and must instead repeat the course or take a different, equivalent course. Exceptions to this rule are possible for provably ill or bereaving students.

Students are informed about each course's assignment requirements and the dates of exams at the beginning of each semester. They also have regular

access to guidance offices in case problems or questions arise. The experts find that the University maintains a high degree of transparency within its examination system, and that this system is appropriately challenging and relevant for the determination of whether the envisaged qualification objectives have been met. The outstanding student support allows the students to cope with the amount of exams (see also Criterion 3).

In terms of compensation measures for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, the University has a host of assistive devices which are made available to, for example, the visually impaired. With these devices, they can record lectures, transcribe them to Braille to review for exams, and perform similar tasks.

Strategic documents and handbooks containing information on administrative procedures and other University matters are distributed to students at the beginning of their studies.

From the experts' point of view, the requirements of the criterion are fulfilled.

3.3.5 Teaching staff and material equipment

The teaching load in the Master study program "Sociology" is managed by thirteen faculty members. These include two full professors, one associate professor and ten assistant professors. All of these faculty members hold a Ph.D. in their fields and supervise Master theses in the program. As shown by the curricula vitae submitted by the University, the experts find that these faculty members have considerable firsthand experience in the field of sociology. During the on-site visit, the experts found the human resources of the Master program "Sociology" to be highly motivated and dedicated to their teaching tasks.

The experts also note that the faculty in the program is provided with considerable support and resources by the University in order to encourage scholarly engagement. The University bears the financial burden of its faculty's organization of conferences and workshops on various levels, participation in conferences and scientific symposia, research projects, and leaves of absence for research. Grants and rewards for scientific publications are also made available to the faculty.

However, from the experts' point of view, the program would strongly benefit from one or two additional professorships, especially considering the professional and academic background and the dedication of the faculty members that should be met by more opportunities for internal progression. Additionally, further full professors would enrich the development and implementation of the study program by plurality in opinions.

In summary, from the experts' point of view, the teaching staff of the program is appropriately qualified and experienced to provide students with theoretical knowledge and research skills. They are also adequately compensated and rewarded to encourage continuous academic activity and engagement.

During the on-site visit, the experts had the chance to visit student and faculty premises used for the implementation of the Master study program "Sociology" program, including the central library. The University has appropriate funding to provide the necessary learning resources and material equipment, and can guarantee the sufficiency and accessibility of books, databases, electronic resources and periodical publications. Faculty members have the possibility to suggest book orders. The library carries out regular analyses of user behavior in order to adjust their inventory based on student needs.

To conclude, the M.A. study program "Sociology" has excellent facilities at its disposal for the teaching and learning requirements.

3.3.6 Quality assurance

Quality management processes at Sultan Qaboos University are under continuous monitoring and control coordinated by the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) at the university level and the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committees (QAAC) at both the college and departmental levels. The QAAC regularly conducts surveys among students and teaching staff. It advises and supports the departments to ensure congruence of quality and processes with the University's mission and strategies. The University itself adopted a Strategic Plan 2016-2040 in order to meet the Omani national higher education strategy which focuses on training a highly-educated generation of academics, researchers and graduates to meet the needs of Oman in terms of specialized cadres in all disciplines. On the College level, this strategic plan is put into practice by a Departmental Quality Assurance Action Plans, each of five year duration, which list periodic activities to be done to assure adherence to quality standards.

To monitor and develop the quality of the study program itself, each course has a delegated coordinator who is responsible for ensuring that the major course objectives are congruent with the objectives of the program, department, college and University. Assessment methods measure the objective achievement of all courses. These methods include course specification and reports, as well as surveys conducted on students, alumni and employees. Student feedback is also taken into account through the Student-Department Liaison Committee which consists of the Head of Department, a Sociology faculty member, a Social Work faculty member, two Sociology students (male and female) and two Social Work students (male and female). Student workload is evaluated by the Department at the end of each semester, using the students' Grade Point Averages as indicators of difficulty in terms of content and workload. Support is given by the Academic Advisors assigned to every student. The surveys have shown a general satisfaction with course difficulty, content, teaching methods, professional ethics, etc. At the end of each course, course coordinators unify and summarize the course reports, used to analyze course strengths and weaknesses. Each course's file is inspected by an ad hoc group formed from the CASS Quality Assurance Committee for content, assessment methods and compliance with learning objectives.

For continuous adjustments of the program according to developments in the society, on the labor market and in the scientific community, the Department of Sociology and Social Work established an Advisory Committee composed of academic staff and external stakeholders from the labor market, and Joint Committees with main stakeholders from government sectors as forum to promote cooperation.

Finally, the Department Board, consisting of all faculty and training supervisors, is furnished with the findings and recommendations made from the analyzed feedback from the Advisory Committee, student surveys, alumni surveys and supervisors for internships (field training) and transfers them into an action plan.

From the experts' point of view, the University maintains a well-functioning quality assurance system which is implemented by all internal stakeholders and leads to quality improvement and program development plans.

Moreover, the experts find that the University carries out not only internal but also external quality assurance procedures on a cyclical basis. Besides accredi-

tation for each of its programs, the College of Arts and Social Sciences itself went successfully through a process of institutional accreditation in 2016 which confirmed that the College's quality assurance system is based on well-defined processes, leaving no doubt that a quality culture is present at all levels of the College.

Overall, the experts' opinion of the program's quality assurance mechanisms is very positive. The experts got the impression of a strong commitment to quality management and quality assurance in higher education at the College. However, the expert group recommends that the College representatives keep the quality assurance system as lean as possible and to focus not only on processes of quality assurance but also on quality enhancement, through further promoting of the quality culture in the College.

As such, the experts consider this criterion as being fulfilled.

3.3.7 Gender equality and equal opportunities

On site, the experts got the impression that the College of Arts and Social Sciences commits itself to provide an embracing environment for academic creativity and development, while respecting diversity and a multicultural understanding. The Sultan Qaboos University strives to uphold equal opportunity for all, including those in historically discriminated-against groups such as the disabled, immigrants, student parents, etc. Generally, the experts are impressed by the support that is given to students with particular living circumstances but also of the excellent study conditions as a whole. Sultan Qaboos University does not charge tuition fees for Omani students in undergraduate studies and provides either free accommodation on the campus (for female students and students whose families live beyond 100 kilometers from the campus) or free transportation for students who live within 100 kilometers of the University. Students in M.A. study programs pay tuition fees. Talented students may be encouraged and supported to do their M.A. studies or PhD studies abroad for being offered a teaching job at Sultan Qaboos University.

So far, the College of Arts and Social Sciences is the only college at the University which admits disabled students. To support students with special needs, the College launched a "Guide to Students with Disabilities". Especially students with visual and mobility impairment find facilities as classrooms and offices, bathrooms, prayer rooms and cafeterias provided with signs in Braille system and access ramps or elevators. The Assistive Technology Laboratory

gives students with special needs the opportunity to use specialized electronic devices in order to fulfill their academic needs. On site, the students with special needs confirmed that their learning environment is conducive to their needs.

On site, the experts had the opportunity to speak to male and female students who are taught jointly at Sultan Qaboos University. Students with children confirmed that having the opportunity to leave their children at the University's Nursing and Day Care Center greatly helps to make a regular study process possible. Overall, the experts observe that the University maintains an environment in which male and female students of all backgrounds have equal opportunities to achieve academic success.

Therefore, from the experts' point of view, the requirements of the criterion are fulfilled.

3.4 Summary

The experts' overall impression of the Sultan Qaboos University, the College of Arts and Social Sciences, the Department of Sociology and Social Work and the Master study program "Sociology" is positive. The University convincingly presents itself as a dynamic institution being able to react on national and international educational and social developments and to design the study programs respectively. The University's strengths include the qualified and dedicated instructors and the excellent infrastructure, as well as a meticulously designed study program and educational concepts that show, firstly, a strong commitment to personal development and social responsibility of the students, and, secondly, a clear focus on research and providing professionally experienced graduates with further academic education in order to develop strategies and plans combining their experience with new perspectives for a healthy Omani society. The study program is tailored to educate researchers who accompany, reflect and react on the development of the Omani society. Above all, through the close cooperation with national and governmental bodies, the program's aims and its graduates' employability show promise.

Based on the information from written documents and the results of the on-site visit, the experts came to the conclusion that the study program Master of Arts (M.A.) in "Sociology" offered at the Sultan Qaboos University fulfills the aforementioned accreditation criteria. Hence, the experts have decided to

submit a recommendation to the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS for a positive decision regarding the accreditation of the study program.

For the continuous development of the study program, the experts have outlined the following recommendations:

- The University should further develop and foster the approach of an “Applied Sociology” through designed contents.
- The applied credit point system should also be presented in ECTS units. The Master certificate should be supplemented by a diploma supplement that contains the conversion to the European Credit Transfer System.
- The University should indicate credits for the Master thesis in order to more accurately reflect students’ workload and to ease the possibility of transfers into/out of Oman.
- The University should implement and extend the possibility for the design of individual assessment methods that refer to the students’ professional life.
- The teaching staff should intensify and vary interactive teaching and learning methods.
- The Department of Sociology and Social Work should offer more opportunities for internal progression of the faculty members and benefit from one or two additional full professorships.
- The College of Arts and Social Sciences should keep the quality assurance system as lean as possible and focus not only on processes of quality assurance but also more explicitly on quality enhancement.

4 Decision of the accreditation commission

The decision of the Accreditation Commission of July 25, 2017

The resolution of the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS is based on the University's application, as well as the expert review and the on-site visit covered in the expert report. Moreover, the Accreditation Commission takes into account the response opinion of the University regarding the study program.

The on-site visit of the University took place on April 10-11, 2017, according to the previously agreed-upon schedule.

The accreditation decision is based on the Accreditation Criteria developed by the AHPGS. The Accreditation Criteria are developed by the AHPGS in close accordance with the existing criteria and requirements valid in the Federal Republic of Germany and based on the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG), established by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The study program "Sociology" may be studied as a full-time or a part-time program; for full-time students, the regular study period is four semesters / two years, and for part time students it is six semesters / three years. The study program requires the obtainment of 24 credit points (CP) according to the University's credit hour system, as well as the composition and defense of a Master thesis. The study program comprises eight required and elective courses, as well as two courses intended for thesis preparation. The master study program "Sociology" is completed with the awarding of the academic degree "Master of Arts."

The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS discussed the procedural documents and the vote of the expert group and the response opinion of the University regarding the expert report.

The University's response opinion shows that the University already took the experts' recommendations into consideration.

The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS considers that all Accreditation Criteria are fulfilled and adopts the following decision:

The Master study program "Sociology" is accredited for the duration of five years, until September 30, 2022.

For further development and enhancement of the study program, as well as of the University as a whole, the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS supports the recommendations articulated in the expert report.