The Tourism Department of Sultan Qaboos University

Undergraduate Program Accreditation by AQAS:
The Journey and What it Entails

The tourism undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) offered by the Tourism Department at the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was accredited according to the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) criteria for Program Accreditation in August 2016 for five years. The accreditation was conditional. Within a period of nine months, the condition had to be resolved, documented, and reported to AQAS. This study aims to demonstrate the Tourism Department approach to fulfill the AQAS accreditation certification requirements and condition. Any accreditation journey should be regarded within the context of continuous quality improvement which is a journey with no end. Accreditation is a means not the purpose. Accreditation without its developmental ramifications makes it meaningless.

Keywords: AQAS, Education, Program Accreditation, Oman, Quality, Sultan Qaboos University, Tourism.

Introduction

The function of accreditation in higher education is to ensure quality, accountability, transparency, faculty and student mobility, and encourage planning and implementation for improvement, it entails a process of self-review and peer-review (Lim, 2001; Brown, 2004; Eaton, 2011; Anderson, 2020; Papanikos, 2022).

The key element of an accrediting assurance agency is that it should be independent from ministries and other stakeholders and have autonomous responsibility for operations (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2009).

Accreditation decisions are limited in time. The accreditation license duration is established by the accrediting agency, which generally holds the right to renew or suspend the license, based on how well an institution maintains the accreditation criteria (Vlasceanu et al., 2007).

The tourism undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) offered by Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman) was accredited according to the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) criteria for program accreditation in August 2016 for five years until September 30th, 2021.

AQAS is an independent non-profit organisation for accreditation of higher education institutions and programs in Germany and is a full member of ENQA and listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of both academic
studies and teaching in higher education institutions. AQAS offers program accreditation at Bachelor, Master, and PhD level across all disciplines (AQAS, 2021).

The accreditation of the Tourism Department Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010) was conditional. One condition was required. Within a period of nine months, the condition had to be resolved, documented, and reported to AQAS no later than May 31st, 2017. The offered responses to the AQAS condition were realistic, achievable, and convincing which led to the decision of granting the Tourism Department Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010) the unconditional accreditation privilege for a period of five years until September 30th, 2021. This study aims to demonstrate the Tourism Department approach to fulfill the AQAS accreditation certification requirements and condition.

Achieving an international accreditation by AQAS certifies that the individual program complies with the quality standards of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Upon successful completion of the procedure, universities will receive a certificate as well as report on the quality of the program. The benefits of an international accreditation are summarised in the following (AQAS, 2021):

- An international program accreditation is a quality enhancement tool. External reviews from experts outside the national higher education system provide expertise and guidance.
- An international accreditation increases international acceptance of degrees and foster mobility of students, staff, and research activities.

The Purpose of Accreditation

Universities implement a variety of methods to assure adherence to the highest institutional and program quality standards. With this emphasis on quality, accreditation is the most preferred method of quality assurance (Dill et al., 1996; Yorke, 1999; Kohler, 2003; Blanco-Ramirez, 2015).

Global trends in higher education such as internationalization, competition, and rankings has added to the necessity of institutional and program accreditation (Ulker and Bakioglu, 2019).

Accreditation entails self-regulation and continuous improvement based on periodic reviews under the guidance of a recognized accrediting agency (Manimala et al., 2020), which consequently, improves the public confidence in the worth of an institution or program, the value of its degree or certificate, and its ability to live up to its promises (Eaton, 2011).

Methodology

The current paper is a case study of the Tourism Department undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) accreditation by AQAS. The accreditation journey is described and explained based on:
1. The related literature

2. The Tourism Department documents and reports employed for such an endeavor, which are:
   - Self Evaluation Report (SER) submitted to AQAS
   - Condition fulfillment action report

3. The author own experience as a member of the department and the quality and accreditation committee.

A case study could be descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory (Yin, 2013). The study of the Tourism Department accreditation by AQAS adopts a descriptive explanatory approach.

Case studies do not claim any specific data collection methods but focuses on holistic description and explanation (Merriam, 1998). A descriptive case studies reporting may take a narrative form, delivering a chronological report or by telling the readers a story (McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Gustafsson, 2017)

Findings can rarely be generalized, but a case study can provide insights into events and behaviors. It contributes one’s knowledge of individual, organizational, and social phenomena, and as such are valuable research tools (Yin, 2013).

Understanding AQAS Accreditation System/Cycle

AQAS officials conducted a workshop for the Tourism Department members explaining the agency’s accreditation philosophy and the different aspects of the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER) for accreditation. It was conducted at the College of Arts and Social Sciences - SQU (2 - 4 November 2015). A certificate was given to those who completed the workshop at the end day. At the end of the workshop participants were able to grasp a solid understating of:

- The position of the agency and get to know what happens in the agency when processing the applications (commissions and tasks)
- The accreditation procedure, its different steps, and possible outcomes
- The time schedules for the planned accreditation procedures
- The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) based criteria and indicators
- The structure of SER and the core information/documents required
- The schedule for a site visit
- The composition, tasks, and perspective of the panel of experts
- The follow-up procedure (In case of a conditional accreditation)
AQAS Accreditation Phases

Generally stated, the procedures followed for accreditation fall within four phases: proof of adherence to standards (self-study report done by applying entity), in site visit by accrediting agency auditors, results and decision of being accredited or not (sometimes the outcomes are published), and periodic reviews to assure compliance to standards. These phases are generally reflected in the following steps (Allyn, 1966; Atef et al., 2019; Manimala et al., 2020):

1. Expression of interest
2. Preparation of the self-study report
3. Constituting the peer-review team
4. Peer-visit and review
5. Judgement and recommendation
6. Award of accreditation
7. Continuous improvement

The Tourism Department Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010) accreditation journey passed by the following steps:

1. AQAS workshop for the college on writing the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER) for accreditation
2. Submission of the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER) of the program
3. AQAS feedback on the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER)
4. The decision on the initialization of the accreditation procedure
5. Submission of the (revised) application/Self Evaluation Report (SER)
6. The panel of experts’ nomination
7. The panel of experts site visit and report
8. The accreditation commission for program accreditation decision (Conditional Accreditation)
9. The Tourism Department response to the AQAS Accreditation Condition
10. Program accreditation (Unconditional)

The Application/Self Evaluation Report (SER)

The Tourism Department compiled and submitted a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) to AQAS (December 2015) which was guided by the AQAS criteria and format. The Report consisted of the following sections:

INTRODUCTION
Part ONE: Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)
Part TWO: The Tourism Department in CASS
Part THREE: Tourism Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010)
1. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance
It is worth noting that in 2013, the Tourism Department of Sultan Qaboos University crossed a milestone by being the first Middle Eastern tourism department to achieve the United Nations World Tourism Organization/Themis Foundation-TedQual certification (UNWTO.Themis Foundation-TedQual certification), which was then renewed in 2015 until September 2018, and for three more years from January 2019 until January 2022 (Atef et al., 2019). Based on the department accumulated accreditation experience, the adopted report writing technique was that the Tourism Department Quality and Accreditation Committee Head had the task of compiling the report from A to Z then a panel of the Tourism Department members took the responsibility of checking the report thoroughly criticizing, proposing additions or amendments where necessary. This approach was possible since the department members attended the AQAS workshop on writing the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER) for accreditation.

Feedback and Comments Regarding the Self Evaluation Report (January 2016)

A mini report was sent to the Tourism Department indicating some points that needed further explanation or supporting data/documents. The following is a quoted section of the AQAS feedback and comments report (AQAS, 2016):

It is worth noting that in 2013, the Tourism Department of Sultan Qaboos University crossed a milestone by being the first Middle Eastern tourism department to achieve the United Nations World Tourism Organization/Themis Foundation-TedQual certification (UNWTO.Themis Foundation-TedQual certification), which was then renewed in 2015 until September 2018, and for three more years from January 2019 until January 2022 (Atef et al., 2019). Based on the department accumulated accreditation experience, the adopted report writing technique was that the Tourism Department Quality and Accreditation Committee Head had the task of compiling the report from A to Z then a panel of the Tourism Department members took the responsibility of checking the report thoroughly criticizing, proposing additions or amendments where necessary. This approach was possible since the department members attended the AQAS workshop on writing the application/Self Evaluation Report (SER) for accreditation.

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“…it consists of feedback or suggestions where some additional explanation or further information might be helpful. Please understand these remarks as helpful tool to facilitate the accreditation process. Due to AQAS experience it is possible to anticipate certain expectations of the experts and the early feedback at this stage might help to reduce potential misunderstandings or misperceptions…”

The Accreditation Cycle Initiation

The accreditation cycle was officially initialized by a decision of the Accreditation Commission of Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) in February 2016 (The Accreditation Commission of AQAS, 2016a). An official letter (email) was sent by the “Commissioner for International Affairs” to the “Tourism Department Quality and Accreditation Committee Head” indicating the official initialization of the cycle.

Revised Self Evaluation Report (SER) Submission (March 2016)

The Tourism Department guided by the AQAS feedback and comments report (January 2016) regarding the Tourism Undergraduate Program Self Evaluation Report did the necessary amendments and added the required supporting data/documents, then resent the amended (SER) to AQAS as required.

The Panel of Experts’ Nomination (March-April 2016)

All European Quality Assurance (QA) systems are “Peer-Centred”. AQAS relies on the expertise of experts from different fields. Experts must check the given criteria (ESG) but also to bring in their experience and knowledge. They are free in their judgement responding to no influence by any party. AQAS nominates a panel of experts consisting of:

- Three members with experience in internal QA and administration of a university
- A student member with experience in university administration and accreditation
- A representative of employers/employees

AQAS Accreditation Commission nominated an expert panel, and the Tourism Department did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.
Panel of Experts

- Chairman of the panel - Professor from the University of Applied Sciences Worms, Faculty of Tourism/Traffic, Germany
- Panel member - Representative from the Omani labour market
- Panel member (Student expert) - The University of Applied Sciences Bremerhaven, Cruise Tourism Management, Germany
- Panel member - Professor from Minia University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Egypt
- Coordinator from AQAS

The Panel of Experts Site Visit and Report (April 2016)

Onsite, the experts interviewed different stakeholders: Representatives of the governmental tourism and hospitality sector, representatives of the tourism and hospitality private sector, alumni, and department students. Furthermore, the panel asked for additional documentation, some were department related and others were students’ academic performance related.

The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings by the group of experts to the Tourism Department representatives.

Following the site visit the expert group drafted a report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS criteria for program accreditation. The report was sent to the Tourism Department for comments. The report, together with the comments of the department, formed the basis for the AQAS Accreditation Commission to decide on accrediting the program.

Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS (August 2016)

In August 2016, the study program “Tourism and Hospitality Management” (Bachelor of Arts) offered by Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman) was accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Program Accreditation. The accreditation was conditional (The Accreditation Commission of AQAS, 2016b).

The study program essentially showed compliance 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). The required condition was to be resolved, documented, and reported to AQAS no later than May 31st, 2017, within a period of nine months. Otherwise, the accreditation that was given for a period of five years until September 30th, 2021, would be withdrawn.

The AQAS Audit Report Condition

The AQAS Accreditation Commission decision of conditional accreditation the Tourism Department Undergraduate program was conveyed
in the following words/statements: “…The explicit academic parts of the
program should be enhanced. The academic character of the program as well
as elements of the curriculum developing scientific qualifications in
management, methodology, and academic working skills have to be
strengthened in order to ensure that the Bachelor level of the EQF is fully met.
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…” (The Accreditation Commission of AQAS, 2016b).

A major benefit of accreditation is that the accrediting organization and
the accredited entity collaborate to set standards that would assure maintenance
of educational quality and application of continuous system improvement
mechanisms (Eaton, 2015). The Tourism Department considered the condition
as an opportunity to excel in the provision of Tourism and Hospitality
education.

Structure of the tourism undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010)

The tourism undergraduate program study plan (2010) was composed of
120 credit hours, including seven course categories as follows:

1. University Requirements
2. University Electives
3. College Requirements
4. College Electives
5. Major Requirements
6. Major Electives (6 course levels of the chosen foreign language and 2
   Elective Courses)
7. Specialization Requirements

All students registering in the Tourism Department should study the major
requirements courses, which include 12 courses (34 credit hours). Students
study these courses during their first four semesters in the department. Students
would then proceed towards the specialization requirements courses, which
includes 12 courses (36 credit hours) in one of the department specializations
(Tourism Management - Hospitality Management) for 4 semesters.

Analysis of the 12 “Specialization Requirements” courses indicated that
(See Table 1) they could be classified as “Operational” and/or “Managerial”
courses (Atef, 2018):
Table 1. Specialization Requirements Courses Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization Requirements</th>
<th>TOURISM MANAGEMENT</th>
<th>HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Companies and Travel Agencies Operations</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airlines Operations and Management</td>
<td>O&amp;M</td>
<td>Food Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics of Tourism</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Service in Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Management</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Front Office Operations and management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Applications for Tourism</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>IT Applications for Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Planning and Development</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Housekeeping Operations and Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Accounting for Tourism</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Managerial Accounting for Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Marketing</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hospitality Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources Management for Tourism and Hospitality</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics for Tourism and Hospitality</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility Study of Tourism and Hospitality Projects</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Project</td>
<td>O&amp;M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: O=Operational, M=Managerial, O&M=Operational & Managerial

Adapted from: Atef, 2018

The Tourism Department Response to the AQAS Accreditation Condition

Based on the AQAS Accreditation Commission decision of conditional accreditation the Tourism Department prepared an action plan and reported it (Tourism Department, 2016):

Changes in the Academic Plan (Plan 2010)

There were three courses which covered methodological skills and methods (Semester 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Semester 4: Research Methodology in Tourism and Hospitality, Semester 7: Statistics for Tourism and Hospitality). To assure a smoother flow of the Academic Plan courses and to strengthen students grasp of academic research skills the following course level changes were to be done:

- Statistics for Tourism and Hospitality (TOUR 4021 Specialization Requirement) course to be moved from semester 7 to semester 3 with a new code (TOUR 2021 Major Requirement).
- Tourist Behavior (TOUR 2011 Major Requirement) course to be moved from semester 3 to semester 7 with a new code (TOUR 4011 Specialization Requirement).
Addition of New Courses to the Major Electives List in the Current Academic Plan (Plan 2010)

In the short term, three new courses on general management were to be added to the study plan (Plan 2010) Major Elective: “Introduction to Management”, “Principals of Marketing”, and “Introduction to Organisational Behaviour”, leading to a stronger proficiency in using the general management skills (See Table 2).

Table 2. To be added Major Electives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals of Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Organizational Behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Major Changes in the Coming-up Academic Plan

In the long term, two of the three courses previously added to the academic plan 2010 as Department Electives were to be considered in the New Academic Plan as Major Requirements, (Introduction to Management, Principals of Marketing) in addition to a course on “Principals of Accounting”, these courses would replace and update some of the study plan (Plan 2010) courses leading to a stronger proficiency in using general management skills (See Table 3).

Table 3. To be added Major Requirements (New Academic Plan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses (To be replaced)</th>
<th>Proposed Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Authorities and Organizations</td>
<td>Introduction to Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Tourism Guidance</td>
<td>Principals of Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills for Tourism English I</td>
<td>Communication Skills for Tourism English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills for Tourism English II</td>
<td>Principals of Marketing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The introduced new Academic Plan Courses were intended to equip department students with those skills and competencies, improve their chances to be employed in supervisory and managerial positions, and at the same time better prepare those who intend to join the Department Master’s program.

Quality assurance involves implementing standards, regulations, and procedures that are intended to maintain and continuously improve an academic program. Quality assurance processes in higher education institutions include assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving system-wide processes and outcomes (Vlasceanu et al., 2007).
Program Accreditation (Unconditional)

The offered responses to the AQAS condition granted the Tourism Department Undergraduate Program (Study plan 2010) the accreditation privilege for a period of five years until September 30th, 2021. AQAS trusted that the Tourism Department showed an achievable action plan to resolve the condition, and that the department was keen and dedicated to accomplishing the proposed action plan.

The accreditation status demands continuous quality assurance activities in a dynamic educational environment. Institutions should actively develop their own quality assurance plans and to inform current and future affiliates (staff, lecturers, and students) about the role and benefits of quality assurance and accreditation status on the institutions’ existence and sustainability (Nguyen et al., 2017, Atef et al., 2019).

Conclusions

This case although a success story tackles a critical issue and poses questions for discussion: The condition interferes with the very conceptual model upon which the study plan was constructed. Sure, there was an aim and a philosophy that guided the structure and the composition of the study plan. To accept the condition is to change and amend, were those changes and amendments based on the fact that the study plan was going to be changed anyway? and that those amendments support the new conceptual model that is going to guide the new study plant structuring? What about the industry? One might say that the panel of experts already met different stakeholders and based on this fact and with reference to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area they have done the department a favour, they provided a supportive unbiased basis for the development of a new study plan, AQAS has done the field study on behalf of the department, simply stated, OR: we just accepted the condition to get the accreditation stamp putting in mind the fact that the program has already been accredited by the United Nations World Tourism Organization/Themis Foundation (UNWTO Themis Foundation-TedQual certification) in 2013 which was renewed in 2015 for three more years?

Back to the condition required amendments, do they accord with the TedQual certification accreditation criteria, paradigm, and work frame? To answer this important question, let us go to the basics and the very meaning of accreditation: “External accreditation is the process by which university programs in professional fields are subjected to external review and accreditation by professional bodies. Accreditation by professional bodies ensures that the content of university programs, teaching resources and research outputs are of consistently high quality to meet competency expectations and to support future professionals in their area of expertise”
Accreditation systems do not clash as they are all based on the same conceptual model and apply similar processes. It is common that educational institutions are accredited by the formal local accrediting entity and at the same time hold an accreditation certification of an international entity. As long as, the academic program is well established, well managed, and maintained with clear quality measures it would pass any kind of audit or review.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The tourism undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) offered by the Tourism Department at the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) of by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has received accreditation from two prestigious international accreditation institutions: United Nations World Tourism Organization/Themis Foundation (UNWTO.TedQual certification) and the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs-AQAS), the current study relates to the tourism undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) accreditation by AQAS only, it would be recommended to evaluate and compare between the two accreditation systems based on criteria, standards, and requirements in addition to the merits gained from each.

References


The Accreditation Commission of Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS), (2016a). *Initialization of the accreditation process of the Study Program: Tourism and Hospitality Management (B.A.) offered by the Sultan Qaboos University (Sultanate of Oman)*. Cologne, Germany: Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS).


