The Tourism Department of Sultan Qaboos University Undergraduate Program Accreditation by AQAS: The Journey and What it Entails

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The Tourism Department of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) was accredited by the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) in August 2016 for five years. The accreditation was conditional. Within a period of nine months, an action plan to fulfill the condition had to be established and reported to AQAS. How was the accreditation mission accomplished? This study aims to demonstrate the Tourism Department journey to fulfill the AQAS accreditation certification requirements and condition

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

Introduction

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 organization for accreditation of higher education institutions and programs in Germany and is a full member of The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The agency is dedicated to continuous quality improvement and assurance in higher education. AQAS offers program accreditation at all levels and 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. How was the accreditation mission accomplished? This study aims to demonstrate the Tourism Department journey to fulfill the AQAS accreditation certification requirements and condition.

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Achieving an international accreditation by AQAS certifies that the accredited program conforms to the quality standards of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Upon successful completion of the procedures, accredited entities receive a certificate as well as report on the quality of the program. The benefits of an international accreditation are summarized 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.

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.

A comprehensive study of the tourism undergraduate study plan (2010) indicated that the 12 "Specialization Requirements" courses (See Table 1) based on the courses files analysis could be classified as "Operational" and/or "Managerial" courses (Atef, 2018):

Table 1. *Specialization Requirements Courses Analysis*

Specialization Requirements			
Tourism Management		**Hospitality Management**	
Tourism Companies and Travel Agencies Operations	O	Hospitality Management	M
Airlines Operations and Management	O&M	Food Production	O
Economics of Tourism	M	Service in Hospitality	O
Event Management	M	Front Office Operations and management	O&M
IT Applications for Tourism	O	IT Applications for Hospitality	O
Tourism Planning and Development	M	Housekeeping Operations and Management	O&M
Managerial Accounting for Tourism	M	Managerial Accounting for Hospitality	M
Tourism Marketing	M	Hospitality Marketing	M
Human Resources Management for Tourism and Hospitality			M
Statistics for Tourism and Hospitality			M
Feasibility Study of Tourism and Hospitality Projects			M
Graduation Project			O&M

Note: O=Operational, M=Managerial, O&M=Operational & Managerial
Adapted from: Atef, 2018

Literature Review

Quality of Education is not easily defined, nonetheless, it could be regarded as the elements that form the inputs, processes and outputs of an educational system and the set of services provided to meet stakeholders' expectations and needs (Cheng and Tam, 1997; Becket and Brookes, 2005). In the same context, it could be defined as the degree to which the expectations and the perceptions of stakeholders tend to perfectly match, in other words, the congruency between perceptions and expectations or exceeding expectations means quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Rabbitt and Bergh, 1994; Becket and Brookes, 2008).

Generally speaking, the term quality carries different meanings, for example, a degree of excellence (Peters and Waterman, 1982); the consistent delivery of services and products based on established standards (Rey and Wieland, 1987); fitness for use or purpose (Juran, 1988); and the Fulfilment of an institution's mission and objectives (Harvey and Green, 1993).

Universities follow various paths and apply different methods to assure adherence to the highest institutional and program quality standards. Quality assurance processes in higher education institutions include assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving system processes and outcomes. The ability of an educational institution to assure the sustainable application of a continuous quality improvement process is what differentiates it from other competitors. With this emphasis on quality, accreditation is the most preferred method of quality assurance (Dill et al., 1996; Yorke, 1999; Sripun and Ladkin, 2001; Kohler, 2003; Vlasceanu et al., 2007; 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).

The function of accreditation in higher education is to ensure adherence to quality standards, accountability, transparency, and planning for continuous improvement based on periodic reviews under the guidance of a recognized accrediting organization (Lim, 2001; Brown, 2004; Eaton, 2011; Anderson, 2020; Manimala et al., 2020; Papanikos, 2022).

Accreditation entails a process of self-review and peer-review that focuses on an institution's mission and objectives, evaluating how they are carried out through programs, instructors, graduates, facilities, internationalization and mobility policies, and industry collaborations (Airey et al., 2015), these practices consequently, improve the public confidence in the worth of an institution/ program, the value of its degree/certificate, and its ability to live up to its promises (Eaton, 2011).

Accreditation serves many stakeholders: governments, institutional managers, heads of departments, instructors, students, and employers. The reason is that accreditation evaluates the educational quality of an institution/program that prepares graduates to join a specific job or profession (Barnett, 1992; Hail et al., 2019).

The accreditation procedures commonly followed 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 conformance to standards. These phases are 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 key element of an accrediting organization is that it should be independent from ministries and other stakeholders and have autonomous responsibility for operations (ENQA, 2009).

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).

Accreditation decisions are time limited. The accreditation status validity is established by the accrediting organization, which through audits and reviews holds the right to renew or suspend the accreditation privilege, based on how well an institution conforms to the established accreditation criteria and quality standards (Vlasceanu et al., 2007).

Methodology

The current paper is a case study of the Tourism Department undergraduate program (Study Plan 2010) accreditation by AQAS.

A case study takes many forms, it could be descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory (Yin, 2013). Case studies do not require any specific data collection methods but focus on holistic description and explanation (Merriam, 1998). A descriptive case study may take a narrative approach, reflected in a chronological report or told as a story (McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Gustafsson, 2017)

The Tourism Department case study adopts a descriptive explanatory approach. The accreditation journey is described and explained based on:

1. The related literature
   The body of academic literature on quality and accreditation was reviewed aiming to stress the functions, aims, and benefits of going through the accreditation journey and seeking an international program accreditation certification.
2. The related Tourism Department documents and AQAS reports, were cross examined, summarized and presented in a chronological order, main events and actions taken were stated and narrated, comments were added when necessary to clarify ambiguities. The following are the documents and reports employed:

   - Self Evaluation Report (SER) submitted to AQAS
     The report outline is provided in the current study to demonstrate the department SER components and writing approach.
   - AQAS panel of experts audit report
     This report conveyed the required program improvements. It was analyzed and broken down into amendment actions that informed the condition fulfillment plan.
   - Condition fulfillment action report
     The courses of actions taken to fulfil the AQAS accreditation condition are demonstrated and explained.

3. The author own experience as a member of the Tourism Department and as a member of the department quality and accreditation committee. This fact provides credibility to the narrations/comments and sequence of events established.

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 final day. Completing the workshop, participants were able to grasp a solid understating of:

- The position of the agency and the application processing phases
- The accreditation procedures, 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

The Tourism Department Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010) accreditation journey comprised 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 the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS)
Part THREE: Tourism Undergraduate Program (Study Plan 2010)
1. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance
   - Vision Statement

- Mission Statement
- Objectives
- Student Outcomes
- Quality Assurance Plan
2. Quality of the Curriculum
   - Curricular structure and study plan
   - Courses Monitoring
3. Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students
   - Learning and teaching
   - Study organization and feasibility
   - Assessment and key performance indicators
   - Examinations and examination organization
4. Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification
   - Admission criteria
   - Foundation program
   - Evaluating student performance
   - Students in special life situations
5. Teaching Staff
6. Learning Resources and Student Support
7. Information (Communication and Feedback)
8. External 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 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 compiled a report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS program accreditation criteria. 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 Tourism undergraduate program of Sultan Qaboos University was accredited according to the AQAS program accreditation criteria. The accreditation was conditional (The Accreditation Commission of AQAS, 2016b).

The Tourism Department Head received an email indicating the AQAS Accreditation Commission decision in addition to the panel of experts audit report, which was also published on AQAS official website (www.aqas.de).

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).

The Tourism Department considered the condition as an opportunity to excel in the provision of Tourism and Hospitality education.

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",

"Principles 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*

Course Name
Introduction to Management
Principles of Marketing
Introduction to Organizational Behavior

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, Principles of Marketing) in addition to a course on "Principles 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)*

Courses (To be replaced)	Proposed Courses
Tourism Authorities and Organizations	Introduction to Management
Introduction to Tourism Guidance	Principles of Accounting
Communication Skills for Tourism English I	Communication Skills for Tourism English
Communication Skills for Tourism English II	Principles of Marketing

The introduced new academic plan courses were intended to equip department students with those skills and competencies needed by the job market, 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.

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 (2010) was constructed. Sure, there was an aim and a philosophy that guided the structure and the composition of the study plan (2010). To accept the condition is to change and amend, were those changes and amendments based on the fact that the study plan (2010) was going to be changed anyway? and that those amendments support the new conceptual model that is going to guide the new study plan structuring? What about the industry? One might say that the AQAS 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 Tourism Department, simply stated, OR: The Tourism Department just accepted the condition to get the accreditation stamp? But, and as a reminder, 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 programs, teaching and learning resources and scholarly activities are of consistently high quality to meet stakeholders' expectations and to support future professionals with the required competences and skill set" (Bowker, 2017). Accreditation systems do not clash as they are all based on the same conceptual model and apply similar processes. It is common to see educational institutions who are accredited by the formal local accrediting entity 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.Themis Foundation-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.

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