Malta
Further & Higher
Education Authority

# EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDIT REPORT

## PROVIDER ACCREDITATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

**SIGNUM MAGNUM COLLEGE**

Carried out between
9th and 11th June 2025

Quality education for
confident futures

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# Abbreviations List

| | |
|---|---|
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| CFO | Chief Financial Officer |
| CTO | Chief Technical Officer |
| CPD | Continuing Professional Development |
| ECTS | European Credit Transfer System |
| EQA/QA audit | External Quality Assurance Audit |
| IQA | Internal Quality Assurance |
| KPIs | Key Performance Indicators |
| MFHEA/the Authority | Malta Further and Higher Education Authority |
| MQF | Malta Qualifications Framework |
| NCFHE | National Commission for Further and Higher Education |
| NQAF | National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education |
| SAR | Self-Assessment Report |

# Executive Summary

## Overview of the Audit Process

This report is a result of the External Quality Assurance (EQA) process undertaken by an independent peer review panel. The panel evaluated the documentation submitted by the educational institution and conducted an onsite audit visit. The panel is responsible for reaching conclusions on all Standards in line with the Minimal and Performance Indicators as outlined in the External Quality Assurance Provider Accreditation Manual for Higher Education Institutions. Through this report, the panel also highlighted areas of good practice which, in its view, make a positive contribution to academic standards and quality of education that are worthy of being emulated and disseminated more widely.

### Timeline

| *EQA Audit Timeline – Signum Magnum College* | |
|---|---|
| *Induction meeting* | *21st February 2025* |
| *Desk-based analysis* | *7th May 2025* |
| *Pre-accreditation provider meeting* | *13th May 2025* |
| *Audit visit* | *9th – 11th June 2025* |

## Summary of the Conclusions Reached by the Peer Review Panel

The panel considered 11 Standards. Of these, Standards 4, 7, 8 and 9 were considered substantially compliant, and Standards 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10 and 11 were considered partially compliant.

The panel made 10 Mandatory Recommendations. Of these, five should be addressed within 6 months from the date of publication of this report, and five within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

The panel made 12 Key Recommendations. Of these, six should be implemented within 6 months from the date of publication of this report, five within 12 months from the date of publication of this report, and one within 18 months from the date of publication of this report.

In addition, the panel made three Recommendations.

The panel also identified one example of Good Practice.

## List of Recommendations

### Mandatory Recommendations

MR1: SMC shall formulate its mission statement which explicitly deals with research and the third role of the higher education institution, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR2: SMC shall clearly link strategic and operational planning with allocation of financial resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR3: SMC shall find a way to involve students' and other stakeholders' representatives in governance bodies of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR4: SMC shall clarify the position of the Board of Directors in the organisational structure, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR5: SMC shall establish clear expectations of what pedagogical and didactic skills teaching staff must have in order to provide quality online education, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR6: SMC shall start the monitoring of programmes/implementing the course review, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR7: SMC shall write and formalise policies and procedures for the design of new programmes, including a description of how input from external stakeholders is collected, within 12 months from the date publication of this report.

MR8: SMC shall introduce clear expectations of research performance to review/ appraise academic staff work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR9: SMC shall introduce transparent procedures for funding of research activities of academic staff, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR10: SMC shall clearly indicate in its financial planning documents financial allocations for institutional cooperation, service to society, and internationalisation, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

### Key Recommendations

KR1: SMC should clearly describe the important aspects of quality, the connected indicators, the desired level of those indicators and the ways of monitoring, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report

KR2: SMC should describe clearly what the roles of different internal and external stakeholders (including students) are in quality management, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR3: SMC should expand the Code of Ethics into a document that goes more into detail of what behaviour is or is not expected and tolerated, and what procedures are in place for addressing violations, within 18 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR4: SMC should effectively monitor teaching staff on their pedagogical and didactic skills for online teaching, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR5: SMC should broaden the input used in monitoring of educational quality, beyond student satisfaction surveys, in a structural way, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR6: SMC should effectively support (including financial support) students' participation at relevant conferences, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR7: SMC should define the scheme for providing psychological and career development support for students, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR8: SMC should enhance library services by providing access to additional academic databases, journals and other research resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR9: SMC should ensure that students have free access to all library services; this should be implemented within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR10: SMC should take into account the impact staff has on society when evaluating their work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR11: SMC should strengthen links with employers and members of professions, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR12: SMC should include alumni in the activities aimed at the development of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

### Recommendations

R1: SMC could be clearer on their website about what the PhD offer is, what degree is attached, and what a 'research area' is.

R2: SMC could make an overall analysis of the total staff qualities in order to focus its CPD offering, aligning it with the institutional strategic direction.

R3: SMC could encourage student-led initiatives to organise in-person meetings by providing modest financial support.

### Good Practice Identified

- SMC gives (new) teaching staff a clear induction to the technical side of online teaching including the use of the online learning platform.

# About the External Quality Audit

## About the External Quality Audit

The scope of external quality assurance in Malta is firstly to evaluate the education providers against the indicators included in the External Quality Assurance Provider Accreditation Manual for Higher Education Institutions (https://mfhea.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EQA-Accreditation-Manual.pdf), through the analysis of the self-assessment documentation as well as through the information recorded by the peer review panels during the accreditation visits. Secondly, it is in the scope of external quality assurance to evaluate the progress the providers have made since the previous external quality assurance process, aimed at the continuous enhancement of quality and institutional capacity building of the higher education sector in Malta.

Based on this scope, the external quality assurance processes conducted based on the Manual aim to:

- certify the compliance of the providers with the indicators included in the Manual;
- consolidate the internal quality assurance systems at institutional level;
- support the providers in the quality enhancement and continuous development of their operations;
- increase the quality of learning outcomes across the Maltese higher education sector;
- enhance the student learning experience.

## Standards for Accreditation

Standard 1: Mission and strategic management

Standard 2: Governance, organisational structure and administration

Standard 3: Quality management

Standard 4: Integrity, accountability and information management

Standard 5: Teaching and administrative staff

Standard 6: Design, monitoring and review of programmes

Standard 7: Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Standard 8: Student administration and student support services

Standard 9: Learning resources and facilities

Standard 10: Research, development and/or other creative activity

Standard 11: Institutional cooperation, service to society and internationalisation

The Standards and indicators as per the Manual have been drafted in alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The MINIMAL INDICATORS included in the Manual reflect the mandatory level of achievement that providers have to demonstrate compliance with for accreditation purposes and therefore must be met both before the commencement of their operations (at licensing stage) as well as throughout their activities (during every audit process).

The PERFORMANCE INDICATORS included in the Manual reflect the mandatory level of achievement that providers have to demonstrate compliance with during the audit process in order to have their accreditation confirmed. Therefore, performance indicators must be met, starting with the first audit that a provider undergoes five years after the commencement of its operations as well as throughout their entire licensing period.

Where applicable, additional indicators have been developed in the context of online provision through the *Guidelines for Quality Assurance for Online Learning Providers in Malta*.

The peer review panels are nominated by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA). Each panel shall have a minimum of three members: a Chair, between one and five experts, and at least one student. Each panel has the duty to gather, verify and exchange information and supporting elements so as to be able to check the statements made in the self-assessment documentation, as well as during the accreditation visits, and to formulate their own assessments on the performance of the provider against the Standards included in the present Manual. The peer review panels shall discuss and exchange the collected evidence, verify the comprehensiveness and interpretation of the data, and analyse various sources in order to come to a consensual, coherent and consistent conclusion through triangulation and cross-referencing. All peer review panel members are required to sign a Declaration of Interest Form prior to starting work on the external quality assurance process.

The approach of the QA audit is not simply about checking whether providers adhere to the regulations; it examines how providers are developing their own systems in addressing the expectations of sound management of educational standards and the quality of their learning and teaching provision. It does not involve the routine identification and confirmation of criteria – a 'tick-box' approach – but rather a mature and reflective dialogue with providers about the ways in which they discharge their obligations for quality and the identification of existing good practices.

Peer review panels will consider the indicators included in the Manual when determining the judgement for each Standard. The judgement for each Standard will be expressed as follows:

- Fully compliant - The institution is entirely in alignment with the Standard, which is implemented in an effective manner.
- Substantially compliant - The institution is to a large extent in alignment with the Standard, the general principles of which are followed in practice.
- Partially compliant - Some parts of the Standard are met while others are not; the implementation of the Standard is not effective enough.
- Non-compliant - The institution fails to comply with the Standard.

As part of an enhancement-led approach, the review team will issue recommendations linked to all parts of the operations of the institution. The report therefore distinguishes between:

- Mandatory Recommendations (MR) which are crucial to meet a Standard and shall be implemented within the timeframes decided by the panel and indicated in this report.

- Key Recommendations (KR) which are important to improve a Standard and should be implemented expediently by the institution, within the indicated timeframes, to address weaknesses.

- Recommendations (R) for improvement which are merely suggestions based on the panel's analyses and observations; these could be implemented by the institution.

The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) considered this report and forwarded it, along with the accreditation decision, to the MFHEA Board for endorsement.

## The Peer Review Panel

The peer review panel was composed of:

| | |
|---|---|
| Chair of Review Panel: | Milan Pol |
| Peer Reviewer: | Eltjo Bazen, |
| Student Peer Reviewer: | Milica Kavedžić |
| Accreditation Coordinators (MFHEA): | Giacomo Annese and Bilyana Boshova |

## Specific Terms of Reference

As defined in the MFHEA Quality Audit Manual of Procedures, the panel was responsible for examining how the institution manages its responsibilities to ensure the provision of the quality and standards of the education they offer.

A number of issues were addressed, including the fitness for purpose and effectiveness of the Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) processes, including an examination of the systems and procedures that have been implemented, together with the documentation that supports them; the compliance of licensed providers with the established regulations and any conditions or restrictions issued by the MFHEA; the governance and financial sustainability of providers, including assurance about the provider's legal status, the appropriateness of corporate structures and the competence of staff with senior management responsibilities; and more.

# Institutional Background and Context

Signum Magnum College (SMC) is a higher education institution which was established in 2018 by its president, owner and CEO, Mr Michael Schmelczer. It is closely related to Mr Schmelczer's education services and EdTech Competence Center "Signum Magnum Corporation GmbH" in Vienna which can be seen as the operational backbone and lead-financier of SMC.

SMC offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, namely Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Executive Master of Business Administration (Executive MBA), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). These programmes are provided in an online format with synchronous as well as asynchronous activities. Students as well as academic staff come from different countries of the world.

Education provision seems to be clearly the main focus of the institution, while research and the so-called third role are only in the stage of gradual development.

SMC is licensed and accredited by the MFHEA.

# Analysis and Findings of Panel

## Analysis and Findings of Panel

### Standard 1: Mission and strategic management

**Main Findings**

In the Self-Assessment Report (SAR), the mission of Signum Magnum College (SMC) is formulated as follows "to become the global benchmark in online higher education as the most progressive private adult learning centre through the provision of unsurpassed academic excellence, quality, learning experience, and relevance via state-of-the-art technology" (p. 8).

In the Internal Quality Assurance Manual (p. 5), the mission of SMC is, however, formulated a bit differently: "Signum Magnum College (SMC) has been established with the mission to provide high-quality higher education programmes both locally in Malta and internationally, leveraging best-in-class eLearning technology, systems, processes, and a team of highly experienced academic and non-academic professionals."

In both these formulations, the mission statement of SMC clearly emphasises the focus on teaching/learning. Research and the so-called third mission (public reach) of the higher education institution are not explicitly dealt with in the above stated formulations.

SMC has strategic planning documents, among them the most current is the Strategic Development Plan 2025-2027. This plan stresses four strategic intentions: (1) Continuous Improvement, (2) Growth, (3) Brand Development, and (4) Achieving University Status. Each of these intentions is linked to several goals and several key initiatives. At the end of this short document (four pages) there is a mention of key indicators, namely: "Increase student

enrolment by 25% per year; Achieve at least an 85% student satisfaction rate in annual surveys; Obtain positive re-accreditation with recommendations from MFHEA; Host a minimum of one annual international academic after 2026; Close at least two significant academic and industrial partnerships per year." (p. 3) A timeline for the implementation of the strategic intentions is indicated. As for the resources needed, they are mentioned only briefly and in a general manner: "Sufficient budget allocation for all initiatives; Enhanced technology infrastructure to support all academic and non-academic environments; Dedicated staff for managing strategic alliances and Ambassador leadership." (p. 3) Similarly, a short mention relates to monitoring and evaluation ("Quarterly strategic review meetings involving all major stakeholders; Regular dissemination of updates to faculty, students, and stakeholders", p. 3). Responsibility for implementation of the strategic intentions and goals is not dealt with in this document.

SMC does not have a specifically drafted Operational Plan; elements of operational planning are stated in the Strategic Plan 2025-2027, as indicated above.

As for the financing, SMC is operationally and financially backed up and supported by Michael Schmelczer's education competence centre "Signum Magnum Corporation GmbH" in Vienna, Austria. SMC Austria seems to be supporting all aspects of the SMC Education Group's service chain. A services agreement between SMC Education Group and Signum Magnum Corporation GmbH regulates the tasks and responsibilities and financial arrangement between the two entities. Accordingly, a licence fee of between 5% and 10% of student-generated revenue remains with SMC Education Group, and a Service Fee of between 90% and 95% of student-generated revenue remains with Signum Magnum Corporation GmbH.

The Financial Plan provides a financial forecast for the three years (2024-2026 - this does not exactly focus on the years of the existing strategic plan which is formulated for 2025-2027). Apart from the incomes and expenditures related to teaching/learning, administration, marketing and other activities, the Financial Plan also involves some allocations for research (a total of 30,000 EUR in 2024, 80,000 EUR in 2025, and 80,000 EUR in 2026). A clear alignment with strategic planning is not well visible. The expert panel acknowledges, however, that there is a significant time gap between the institutional probity audit and EQA audit.

SMC has business continuity planning elements in its Financial Plan. Risks are dealt with briefly in another document, titled Risk Management Documentation, in which risk identification and assessment, risk mitigation strategies, and risk monitoring and reporting are briefly outlined.

There is some evidence that SMC collects and uses data to monitor the achievement of its stated objectives. Planning documents do not indicate cascading of the plans further at team and individual levels which can be seen to some extent determined by the size of the institution.

During the interviews, it turned out that the mission statement as well as strategic and other planning documents are mostly developed within the core of the institution, and other stakeholders are involved and/or aware of them to some extent.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

MR1: SMC shall formulate its mission statement which explicitly deals with research and the third role of the higher education institution, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR2: SMC shall clearly link strategic and operational planning with allocation of financial resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 2: Governance, organisational structure and administration

### Main Findings

SMC is a relatively small institution, and governance and leadership are in the hands of the owner and his closest collaborators.

It can be agreed that the persons occupying leadership positions are qualified and fit for the responsibilities of their roles. SMC has the document titled Procedures and Criteria for Election and Appointment of Leadership Positions and Governing Bodies which briefly outlines election and appointment of leadership positions and governing bodies.

It cannot be said, however, that provisions are made for membership of governance bodies to include representatives of all stakeholders - students, for instance, are not a part of it. SMC has a formally adopted organisational structure in which distribution of responsibilities and decision-making is clearly set, and levels and units are clearly defined. The main position (strategy, investments and innovation) has the owner and president in one person. Three lower levels/directions in the organisational structure are divided among (1) Chief Executive Officer/ Chief Technical Officer/Chief Financial Officer (CEO/CTO/CFO) (the owner again), (2) the Head of Institution, and (3) the Director of Quality. According to the SMC's organisational structure, the CEO/CTO/CFO has under his position administration, human resources and recruiting, finance and accounting, business development and international relations, and IT and security. The Head of the Institution has under his leadership academic affairs, faculty, research coordination, doctoral committee, and ethics committee. Quality assurance is located in between the units linked to administration and those related to academic affairs. Such a structure can be viewed as logical and potentially functional.

The SAR mentions the Board of Directors as one of the key bodies at SMC, but it is not stated in the organisational structure provided.

The administration seems to be effective in terms of staffing levels and qualifications. Most of the administration service is based in Vienna.

Staff satisfaction seems to be monitored and evaluated; SMC provided the staff satisfaction survey instrument as well as results, which are to some extent made available within the community and used for possible quality improvements.

It was proven during the interviews that sufficient resources are allocated to cater adequately for the technical infrastructure, training and systems for online learning.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

MR3: SMC shall find a way to involve students' and other stakeholders' representatives in governance bodies of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR4: SMC shall clarify the position of the Board of Directors in the organisational structure, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 3: Quality management

### Main Findings

Although the SAR provided talked about 'the highest standards', for the panel it was not clear for which aspects these standards are set (which indicators of quality), what the high level is that is aimed for (what values for those indicators would have been set), how the institution ensures that these values will be reached, and what instruments are employed to check if those targets have been reached.

SMC has a formal Quality Management (QM) policy in place, in the form of a Quality Assurance Framework and an IQA Manual. This framework, however, describes quality management in the institution on a very general level and does not give any details, procedures or guidelines for the involved parties. The organigram places the QM department in between the academic and the administrative side, which seems to be fitting. The roles in quality assurance are only described for a limited number of actors mainly in the strategic top of the institution. All oversight roles are distributed in this description. For other internal or external stakeholders no expectations with regard to quality management are made explicit.

Administrative functions in the institution are not carried out by the institution itself; those activities are subcontracted. The quality of those activities is regulated by the Service Level Agreement between the parties. The panel did not see and analyse the procedures to check whether the desired quality had been delivered. From the conversations, however, all involved parties including students seemed to be highly satisfied with the service level of the administrative functions.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

KR1: SMC should clearly describe the important aspects of quality, the connected indicators, the desired level of those indicators and the ways of monitoring, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report

KR2: SMC should describe clearly what the roles of different internal and external stakeholders (including students) are in quality management, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 4: Integrity, accountability and information management

### Main Findings

SMC has established a Code of Ethics & Policy on Conflict of Interest, which touches on all of the important issues a code such as this should do. This Code, however, does not go into any detail, and does not do more than stating the obvious. No processes and procedures of potential repercussions are mentioned in the document. In the conversations there was no mention of this Code being invoked. Next to the Code, there is an Ethical Committee. This Committee is only active in the field of student research and does not use the Code of Ethics as its framework.

The institution publishes information about its activities on their public website. Although this information is generally correct and up to date and can be sufficient for prospective students to use in their process of choosing their education, the information about the PhD offer is on the brink of breaching the MFHEA regulations. SMC is allowed to offer a PhD; on the website it is suggested that nine different PhDs are on offer by the institution. This mentioning of "research areas" or "research fields" can cause confusion as to what the formal offer is.

The institution uses information management procedures that ensure the correct and safe usage of information. Lecturers are only assigned to those surroundings in the online environment they need, so that personal information is not visible beyond those who need it. Although the panel did not see and analyse the form signed by students with which they consent to their information being used, based on the conversations the panel is convinced SMC is treating (confidential) information in a correct manner.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

KR3: SMC should expand the Code of Ethics into a document that goes more into detail of what behaviour is or is not expected and tolerated, and what procedures are in place for addressing violations, within 18 months from the date of publication of this report

R1: SMC could be clearer on their website about what the PhD offer is, what degree is attached, and what a 'research area' is.

| Judgement: | Substantially compliant |
|---|---|

## Standard 5: Teaching and administrative staff

### Main Findings

As an online institution, SMC staff is online too. This fact does not, however, seem to be of any consequence in what is expected of (mainly teaching) staff, other than that they can be based anywhere in the world. Whereas virtually all stakeholders acknowledged that in online interaction it is harder to have the same richness as in physical interaction, this realisation did not lead to any kind of special attention for online social (didactical, pedagogical) skills. The skills that SMC pays attention to are all related to the technical side of online interaction. Although it is important to have the technical side covered, this can only be seen as a basic precondition for online education, not as the be-all and end-all of online teaching skills.

The institution offers clear guidance on the technical side of online teaching and the use of the online learning platform.

Although there is an individual possibility offered for continuing professional development (CPD), the institution does not make an overall analysis of the total profile of the current staff to assess whether it needs to adjust specific aspects. By doing this, SMC would ensure the quality of the collective faculty and would be able to offer CPD focussed on the institutional needs.

Staff evaluation/performance review does happen on a structural and structured basis, but in the conversations with the panel it was clear that this system might need to be adjusted. The panel concurs, and the fact that this realisation is present in the institution is a positive sign of self-reflection. The current system works, on the one hand, with performance indicators that seem clear but are impractical in their implementation and with potential signals such as results of student satisfaction surveys not coming to the lecturer directly but only through interpretation by the head of institution, on the other.

Administrative functions are not carried out by SMC staff, but these services are externally hired. Although the panel did not see and analyse the Service Level Agreement between the institution and the provider of the administrative services, from the conversations it was clear what the expectations for the administrative staff are.

### Good Practice Identified

- The institution gives (new) teaching staff a clear induction to the technical side of online teaching including the use of the online learning platform.

Recommendations for Improvement

MR5: SMC shall establish clear expectations of what pedagogical and didactic skills teaching staff must have in order to provide quality online education, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR4: SMC should effectively monitor teaching staff on their pedagogical and didactic skills for online teaching, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

R2: SMC could make an overall analysis of the total staff qualities in order to focus its CPD offering, aligning it with the institutional strategic direction.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 6: Design, monitoring and review of programmes

### Main Findings

Monitoring of educational quality does happen in the institution, but the only structural instrument employed is the student satisfaction survey. However, the results of this survey do not reach the lecturers directly, but in a mediated way are interpreted by the head of the institution. Other structural means of monitoring do not exist. Informally students can be invited to talk with their lecturers about the educational quality, but it is not clear how many lecturers actively invite them to do this and to what extent, how safe students feel to address potential issues and what would happen with suggestions for improvement collected in this way. There is no (formal) student body that could function as a mediary between students and the institution and to address issues students are experiencing. External stakeholders do not play any role in monitoring of quality.

Moreover, the monitoring described here is applicable to module level, although on paper there is the possibility to monitor education at programme level, the panel did not encounter any example of this happening in practice. The fact that the MFHEA should sign off on significant changes made to existing programmes is in no way hindering the institution to monitor the educational quality of its programmes, design improvements and implement minor improvements.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

MR6: SMC shall start the monitoring of programmes/implementing the course review, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR7: SMC shall write and formalise policies and procedures for the design of new programmes, including a description of how input from external stakeholders is collected, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR5: SMC should broaden the input used in monitoring of educational quality, beyond student satisfaction surveys, in a structural way, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 7: Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

### Main Findings

The teaching methods and learning environment at SMC are student-centred, ensuring that each student receives appropriate support and supervision. Students are encouraged and motivated to take an active role in the learning process, a fact confirmed during interviews.

Teaching is delivered entirely online using the Microsoft Office suite and a customised version of Microsoft Teams. During online classes, students are required to have their cameras on. Engagement is promoted through interactive teaching, with instructors asking questions and requiring students to present their work to peers in the online environment.

Assessment methods are varied and include individual assignments, mentoring and group work, ensuring that they are fit for purpose. Students are informed about their assignments via the Microsoft Teams platform.

The number of attempts a student is allowed to pass a given assignment is regulated by SMC; typically limited to two, with a maximum of three.

SMC has developed several policies, including the Policy and Procedure for Assessment and Procedures and Mechanisms for the Detection and Prevention of Plagiarism. However, these documents appear generic and do not fully reflect SMC's specific practices.

A student survey procedure is in place, as confirmed during interviews with current students and alumni. Also, a complaints and appeals procedure is in place, though it has not yet been utilised, as confirmed during interviews.

SMC has clearly defined the responsibilities of supervisors at all levels. Students interviewed expressed satisfaction with the supervision received, highlighting the dedication and availability of faculty throughout their studies.

Thesis evaluation is held to a high standard. As noted in interviews, this is ensured through a two-step process: an initial review by the Doctoral Committee followed by evaluation by external reviewers, who also attend the thesis defence alongside faculty members.

Interviews also revealed that there is currently no formal career consulting service for students. Additionally, a Student Council has not been established, largely due to the small student population. As a result, students have not been involved in SMC's governance structures.

Although SMC has not established an official student communication network, students have created their own communication channels using digital platforms.

During interviews with students and alumni, it was evident that they were generally satisfied with their studies at SMC. They particularly emphasised the motivation and support provided by their teachers and supervisors throughout their academic journey.

Students also highlighted the flexibility of SMC's online learning model as one of its main strengths. However, they noted a lack of opportunities for social interaction as a significant drawback.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

KR6: SMC should effectively support (including financial support) students' participation at relevant conferences, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Substantially compliant

## Standard 8: Student administration and student support services

### Main Findings

SMC provides information about the institution on its website, the range of programmes offered, admission procedures, tuition fees, and all other relevant details for prospective students, as confirmed during the interview. Additionally, it was confirmed that SMC offers a fee reduction for students who can demonstrate financial hardship.

Almost all policies that provide clear and transparent information for all phases of the student lifecycle were shared with the panel prior to the audit. The exception is the Admission Policy, which was not available. However, the admission procedure is well explained on the SMC website. It is worth noting that these policies appear to be generic and lack a direct connection to SMC's actual practices.

Admission requirements are clearly defined and managed by administrative staff based in Vienna. The SMC website offers detailed information on the prerequisites and supporting documentation required for enrolment. As part of the admission process, SMC staff conducts interviews with prospective students. Feedback gathered during the audit confirmed that students are generally satisfied with the support provided by the administrative staff. Additionally, the online application system was noted to be both intuitive and informative, contributing positively to the overall admission experience.

Following enrolment, each student signs a student agreement with SMC, which safeguards their rights and interests.

Student data is stored and managed through Microsoft Teams, allowing for individual monitoring of academic progress.

Procedures and mechanisms for detecting and preventing plagiarism are in place. SMC uses Turnitin software for this purpose. During the interview, it was mentioned that there has been at least one case of student plagiarism.

SMC has assigned supervisors to support student progress, and extra tutoring is also available. However, SMC does not currently provide psychological or career development support for students.

Financial support is not available to students; however, they may apply for a special fee discount based on their financial hardship.

Although SMC has not established an official student communication network, students have created their own communication channels using digital platforms.

During interviews with current students and alumni, it was noted that the admission procedure was clearly communicated prior to enrolment, and that administrative staff were readily available to address any inquiries.

Additionally, both students and alumni identified flexibility as one of SMC's key strengths. However, students also highlighted a lack of social interaction and a sense of belonging as significant disadvantages.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

KR7: SMC should define the scheme for providing psychological and career development support for students, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

R3: SMC could encourage student-led initiatives to organise in-person meetings by providing modest financial support.

Judgement: Substantially compliant

## Standard 9: Learning resources and facilities

### Main Findings

SMC offers exclusively online studies across all three levels of education. For this purpose, SMC utilises the Microsoft Office platform along with a customised version of Microsoft Teams.

At the request of the panel, SMC provided its IT Policy and Data Protection Policy, as well as Library Policy and Regulations. However, as previously mentioned in earlier Standards, these documents appear to be generic and lack direct relevance to SMC's specific practices.

The learning platform is fit for purpose and functions effectively, as confirmed during the interviews. It is used for accessing online lectures, assigning tasks, supervising and grading student work. Additionally, the platform includes a section with general information about SMC, such as recent news, and serves as a social networking hub for the SMC community. The Microsoft Teams online classroom is well-structured, with dedicated icons for all three levels of study. It is mandatory for students to turn on their cameras during lectures. All lectures are recorded, allowing students to revisit them as needed.

Information about SMC's digital resources is provided to staff and students upon enrolment. Students have continuous access to the learning platform, where all course-related materials can be found, assignments submitted, and formal communications carried out. Students also have access to the student handbook and anti-plagiarism software through the platform. Both students and lecturers confirmed that the platform possesses all the necessary functionalities to support and enhance the academic experience.

SMC is equipped with backup systems to ensure continuity in case of system failures.

A dedicated section of the learning platform serves as the online library, accessible to all enrolled students and faculty members. Currently, SMC provides access to JSTOR and ProQuest libraries. During interviews, it was noted that some library materials require payment by students, which is later reimbursed by SMC. Conversations with both students and teachers across all study levels revealed that the majority are generally satisfied with the library services. However, analysis of student satisfaction surveys indicates that increasing the availability and accessibility of academic journals, databases and other research resources should be considered a key area for improvement.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

KR8: SMC should enhance library services by providing access to additional academic databases, journals and other research resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR9: SMC should ensure that students have free access to all library services; this should be be implemented within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Substantially compliant

## Standard 10: Research, development and/or other creative activity
(applicable only to universities and providers that deliver programmes at MQF level 8)

### Main Findings

At the moment, research seems to be an under-developed area of SMC's operation. As already mentioned earlier in this report, research is not an explicit part of the mission statement, nor is it explicitly dealt with in strategic planning. The Financial Plan, however, includes a certain allocation (not high) for research in the years 2024-2026. It is not clear, however, what was/is/will be financially supported in this respect.

SMC has drafted a document titled Research Performance Expectations and Review Mechanisms. There is not much evidence (and interviews with the academic staff proved it) that this document has been effectively used so far, and that performance in relation to these expectations is considered in the individual performance review system and in promotion criteria. The Ethics Committee is a part of the organisational structure and, as was emphasised during the interviews, its members are prepared to deal with the issues if necessary. But they could not recall cases when it happened in the past.

It can be said, however, that the teaching staff is encouraged to include into their teaching latest information based on research (in the best case also on their own research).

Quality of research activity of the institution is not currently in the focus of its self-evaluation and self-analysis; but SMC provided a Report on Research Activities of the Department (Advanced AI Studies) for the period November 2024 - April 2025, which shows some research-related developments.

Since SMC also has a PhD as well as DBA and Executive MBA programmes, research activities of students can be acknowledged. Students conduct their own research, being supervised by academic staff.

SMC has drafted an Institutional Research Development Statement 2025–2028 Strategic Framework. Two research-driven departments (Advanced AI Studies, Austrian Economics) are planned to be gradually transformed into research centres which should be a core of research development at SMC.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

MR8: SMC shall introduce clear expectations of research performance to review/appraise academic staff work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

MR9: SMC shall introduce transparent procedures for funding of research activities of academic staff, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

## Standard 11: Institutional cooperation, service to society and internationalisation

### Main Findings

Institutional cooperation is explicitly mentioned in one of the strategic intentions (Growth) of the Strategic Plan 2025-2027. Namely, it is the goal "Strengthen partnerships with international educational institutions and industry stakeholders." (p. 2); and among the key initiatives that should lead to achievement of this goal there is the one that states, "Formalize strategic alliances with prominent global industry leaders to enhance employment opportunities for graduates." (p. 2)

SMC has drafted the document International Strategy 2025-2027, in which five strategic objectives are formulated. They are as follows: (1) Expand International Student Enrolment, (2) Enhance Global Academic Offerings, (3) Foster Strategic International Partnership, (4) Promote SMC's Global Brand and Identity, and (5) Strengthen Institutional Infrastructure for Global Excellence. Each of these objectives is elaborated into several goals/tasks, a brief mention about monitoring and evaluation and non-specified information about financial allocations are mentioned there, too.

The Financial Plan does not explicitly deal with institutional cooperation, service to society and internationalisation, however, there is a sum of 20,000 EUR per year allocated for travels in the period 2024-2026 which can possibly be viewed as relevant to some related activities.

The expert panel was provided with one Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2024 between SMC and Inti International University (Malaysia) which envisaged cooperation in a number of areas. Also, evidence of cooperation with two other organisations was provided. In general, the links of SMC with employers and members of professions are not well visible.

SMC has provided evidence about its effort to keep in touch with alumni. They do not seem to be involved in the development of the institution, though.

Engagement in international cooperation and contributions to the community do not seem to be included in promotion criteria and staff performance review. The impact staff has on society is not explicitly considered when evaluating their work.

As for the cooperation of SMC with the expert panel during this evaluation process, it can be said that while the SMC's representatives were cooperative during the site visit and organised it well, before the site visit, the expert panel was at first provided with the SAR and other documentation that were not sufficiently informative. As a result, the panel had to ask for a long list of additional documentation which was then provided by SMC. It needs to be pointed out that such a practice is not helpful to the whole process.

### Good Practice Identified

None.

### Recommendations for Improvement

MR10: SMC shall clearly indicate in its financial planning documents financial allocations for institutional cooperation, service to society, and internationalisation, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR10: SMC should take into account the impact staff has on society when evaluating their work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR11: SMC should strengthen links with employers and members of professions, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR12: SMC should include alumni in the activities aimed at the development of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

Judgement: Partially compliant

# Panel Member Signatures

The audit report is compiled by the peer review panel:

Chair of Review Panel: Milan Pol

Peer Reviewer: Eltjo Bazen

Student Peer Reviewer: Milica Kavedžić

# Response by the Provider

## Preamble

Signum Magnum College expresses its sincere appreciation to the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority and to the members of the peer review panel for the professional, and enhancement-oriented External Quality Assurance Audit carried out between 9 and 11 June 2025.

The findings provide SMC with a comprehensive, valuable, and constructive analysis of its current level of alignment with accreditation standards, confirming areas of strength and, equally important, identifying areas for improvement and further development.

SMC accepts the findings and recommendations of the report and views them as a valuable roadmap for the next phase of its institutional development. The following action plan translates each recommendation into concrete measures and timelines.

As an institution that was founded with a clear focus on quality online higher education and that aspires to become a recognised powerhouse in this field, SMC is committed to using the audit outcomes to strengthen its academic standards, student experience and institutional capacity in a sustainable way, and to ensure that its operations, governance and resource allocation are fully aligned with its renewed mission and strategic intentions.

SMC is grateful to the Authority and the panel for their collegial dialogue, their careful assessment of the provided documentation, constructive meetings with our stakeholders, and their willingness to provide candid, forward-looking feedback.

SMC looks forward to continued cooperation with the MFHEA as it implements the enclosed action plans and works to achieve full compliance with all Standards and to fulfil its mission of delivering high-quality, research-informed and socially engaged online higher education to a diverse global community.

Response to Mandatory Recommendations Made by the Peer Review Panel

| Action plan | | |
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| Mandatory Recommendations | Actions to be taken to address the recommendations | Date for completion |
| Standard 1: | | |
| MR1: SMC shall formulate its mission statement which explicitly deals with research and the third role of the higher education institution, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | Following receipt of the draft Audit Report, the President of SMC has drafted a revised mission statement as follows:<br><br>*"To provide high-quality, accessible online higher education in relevant and sought-after disciplines to a diverse global community; to advance knowledge and innovation through responsible, practice-oriented and scholarly research; and to contribute to society by widening participation in higher education and by sharing its expertise and research outcomes with organisations, communities and policy makers."*<br><br>This formulation explicitly complements the existing emphasis on teaching and learning by clearly articulating SMC's long-term commitment to research and to its third role/public engagement, thereby addressing the panel's observation that previous mission formulations focused almost exclusively on education provision.<br><br>Within the required six-month period, the mission statement will be formally approved by the Board of Directors and will be incorporated into all core institutional documents and points of reference. The revision process will involve consultation with academic and administrative staff, students and selected external stakeholders to ensure that the new mission is genuinely owned across the organization. | March 2026 |
| MR2: SMC shall clearly link strategic and operational planning with allocation of financial resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will connect strategic and operational planning and the allocation of financial resources. Substantiating on the Strategic Development Plan, SMC will introduce a budget framework in which each strategic intention and its associated goals are translated into concrete initiatives with defined owners, timelines, measurable indicators and corresponding budget lines. | April 2026 |

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| | For every key initiative, SMC will allocate the planned annual expenditure, maintaining SMC's successful floating budget approach. The financial planning horizon will be synchronised with the strategic plan period.<br><br>A Performance Measurement and Management System will measure KPI Actuals vs. Targets to analyse and manage actions and any necessary reallocations of resources formally agreed and documented. This process will ensure that financial decisions are demonstrably driven by strategic priorities and that planned developments in key areas are financially backed. | |
| Standard 2: | | |
| MR3: SMC shall find a way to involve students' and other stakeholders' representatives in governance bodies of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will establish a Student Council as the primary representative body for all enrolled students, with members elected by their peers from each program level and with a clear charter describing its mandate, election procedures, term of office, quorum and decision-making rules. The Student Council will be formally linked to the Head of Institution and the Director of Quality and will nominate student representatives or observers to relevant committees and fora, such as quality assurance meetings, program and course reviews, consultations on new program design, and strategic discussions on the Digital Campus.<br><br>In parallel, SMC will establish an External Stakeholder Advisory Board composed of subject experts, alumni and representatives of relevant professions and partners, whose role will be to provide regular feedback on the relevance of programs, the skills and competences of graduates, and opportunities for collaboration, live projects and internships. Terms of Reference for the Student Council and the External Stakeholder Advisory Board will be drafted and approved, specifying their composition, scope of work, frequency of meetings, reporting lines and how their advice feeds into decision-making.<br><br>SMC will update its Internal Quality Assurance Manual and Quality Assurance Framework to describe the roles and responsibilities of student and external representatives in monitoring and enhancing educational quality, and it will integrate these bodies in the organisational chart (see MR4). Elections, appointments and induction activities for | Nov 2026 |

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| | student and external representatives will be carried out within the stipulated timeframe, and evidence of their participation will be documented through agendas, minutes and action logs of meetings, as well as references in annual quality assurance reports and programme review documentation. | |
| MR4: SMC shall clarify the position of the Board of Directors in the organisational structure, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will clarify and formally document the position of the Board of Directors as the apex governance body in its organisational structure and will initially include the Owner/CEO/President, the Head of Institution, the Director of Quality and (new) HR Director. If the roles of CTO and CFO detach from the President (who currently holds these roles), the CTO and CFO will be part of the Board of Directors.<br><br>The Board of Directors is chaired by the President and CEO. Board of Directors Terms of Reference will be drafted and approved, defining the Board's composition and role. The revised organigram will show the Board of Directors below the Owner, who appoints the Board of Directors with clear reporting lines. SMC will align all core documents, manuals, and relevant points of reference with this clarified structure and governance model, so that the role of the Board of Directors is transparent to internal and external stakeholders and consistently described. | March 2026 |
| Standard 3: | | |
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| Standard 4: | | |
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| Standard 5: | | |
| MR5: SMC shall establish clear expectations of what pedagogical and didactic skills teaching staff must have in order to provide quality online education, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | Since its initial accreditation, SMC has had formalized didactic and pedagogical policies in place. These policies are embedded in two documents: "SMC Pedagogical Methods" and "Pedagogical Guidelines and Procedures." Both documents have undergone several updates. After the panel's visit, however, SMC Pedagogical Methods was thoroughly updated and now serves as the foundational document on pedagogy and didactic methods for online learning. Conversely, "Pedagogical Guidelines and Procedures" remains part of a larger onboarding document that SMC sends to each new faculty member, but it will be updated and aligned with the most important elements from Pedagogical Methods. "Pedagogical | Jan 2026 |

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| | Methods" outlines methods for online learning and clearly defines the didactic and pedagogical skills required of teaching staff. As part of our ongoing monitoring of educational activities, SMC will regularly update these documents based on feedback from class activities to align them with the dynamic nature of online education at SMC.<br><br>**see Annex 1** – SMC Pedagogical Methods<br><br>**see Annex 4** – SMC Faculty Handbook page 5 "Pedagogical Guidelines and Procedure" | |
| Standard 6: | | |
| MR6: SMC shall start the monitoring of programmes/ implementing the course review, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will initiate programme monitoring based on IQA guidelines in three steps:<br><br>1) The Office of Academic Affairs will establish an academic committee to analyse the programs' history, purpose, and topicality during the self-study phase. The committee, as per IQA, will survey students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders. (Dec 2025/January 2026)<br><br>2) The committee will review the self-study data and assess which program segments should be revised or replaced based on the research findings. The committee will state whether a minor or larger changes are required, and if there is a need for a completely new program to be introduced. (February/March 2026)<br><br>3) The Office of Academic Affairs will devise an action plan to address the review findings, including a timeline for completion, the responsible staff, and the necessary resources. (April/May 2026)<br><br>Depending on the initial program accreditation, a new stipulation will be introduced in the IQA stating that the programs (BBA, EMBA, DBA, Ph.D.) are typically reviewed on a set cycle, of every 5, 7 or 10 years from the program's accreditation. | May 2026 |
| MR7: SMC shall write and formalise policies and procedures for the design of new programmes, including a description of how | SMC already has a policy and procedures for designing new programs but will initiate a process to revise and expand these policies and procedures as recommended.<br><br>This process will include a more detailed description of how external stakeholders' input is collected. The relevant external stakeholders whose opinions will | Sep 2026 |

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| input from external stakeholders is collected, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | be analysed may include alumni, employers, industry representatives, accrediting bodies, professional organizations, government officials, policymakers, and global partners and communities. These groups are involved because they directly benefit from, invest in, regulate, or influence the school's reputation, quality, and graduates' success. | |
| Standard 7: | | |
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| Standard 8: | | |
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| Standard 9: | | |
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| Standard 10: | | |
| MR8: SMC shall introduce clear expectations of research performance to review/appraise academic staff work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | The SMC Research Performance Expectations and Review Mechanisms document outlines research performance expectations. It will be expanded to include more concrete and precise expectations for reviewing and appraising the work of academic staff. Then, it will be distributed to the staff. Each staff member will be expected to demonstrate measurable engagement by publishing a certain number of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or monographs within a specified timeframe. The document will also include expectations regarding other academic requirements, such as involvement in national or international conferences and participation in funded research projects. Other expectations include supervising at least one master's or doctoral thesis every two years; submitting at least one competitive grant application or research proposal within the defined timeframe; and developing at least one applied or practice-based research output every five years. Staff will also be expected to present evidence of the public dissemination of their research activities annually, such as through a lecture or media contribution. They will also be expected to maintain full compliance with ethical standards, including proper data management and authorship integrity. | Sep 2026 |

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| MR9: SMC shall introduce transparent procedures for funding of research activities of academic staff, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | The procedure will include several key stages to secure funding for research activities of academic staff through SMC. It will begin with idea generation and planning, where researchers identify gaps in existing knowledge, ensure alignment with the institution's research priorities, conduct a thorough literature review to refine research questions, and assess resource needs to determine whether internal or external funding is required. Next, the procedure will include proposal development, which involves crafting a comprehensive proposal with clear objectives, detailed methodology, expected outcomes, and a well-prepared budget covering both direct and indirect costs, as well as creating a realistic timeline using tools like Gantt charts to outline activities and milestones. The procedure will then include internal institution processes, requiring researchers to contact the Research Coordinator Office and the Office for Academic Affairs for compliance guidance, submit the proposal through the institution's internal review system for electronic approvals from relevant authorities, and obtain all necessary institutional signatures. Following internal clearance, the procedure will include submission to the Office for Academic Affairs, which will act as the formal gateway for proposals seeking funding from SMC, ensuring that all institutional standards are met and the proposal is properly recorded. Finally, the procedure will include post-award management, where researchers must manage the project according to SMC's funding guidelines and contractual obligations, meet all deliverables and reporting requirements, track expenditures meticulously to stay within the approved budget, and submit all required final reports to both Administration and the Research Coordinator Office. | Nov 2026 |
| Standard 11: | | |
| MR10: SMC shall clearly indicate in its financial planning documents financial allocations for institutional cooperation, service to society, and internationalisation, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | In alignment with MR2 and Strategic Development Plan, SMC will identify the key types of measures and actions to finance and implement these three areas.<br><br>While Internationalization and Institutional Cooperation fall under Business Development, separate sub-budget items within the Business Development Budget will be established to distinguish both and allocate funding. | November 2026 |

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| | Service to Society will be integrated as a new main budget header (like Business Development) with sub-headers for specific initiatives.<br><br>Consequently, and in alignment with MR2, Institutional Cooperation, Internationalization, and Service to Society will be linked in a traceable way to the strategic and operational planning and objectives and measured against targets. | |
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Response to Key Recommendations and Recommendations Made by the Peer Review Panel

| Action plan | | |
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| Recommendations | Actions to be taken to address the recommendations | Date for completion |
| Standard 1: | | |
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| Standard 2: | | |
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| Standard 3: | | |
| KR1: SMC should clearly describe the important aspects of quality, the connected indicators, the desired level of those indicators and the ways of monitoring, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report | The SMC Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) will be expanded to accommodate a description of a more comprehensive system that integrates teaching, research, and operational performance to ensure continuous improvement and high standards across the institution. In that way, the key elements of quality aspects will be described.<br><br>Central to this framework is the Flow-Through Design Process (see below annexes: Figure 1 and Figure 2), which aligns course design, faculty development, learner expectations, and curriculum integration to create a seamless and sustainable academic environment.<br><br>Quality will be further described through transparent and objective faculty assessment, where performance, competence, and online teaching experience are systematically evaluated, with performance weighted most heavily and regular annual reviews determining faculty ranking and compensation.<br><br>Operational excellence will be described indicators such as financial performance, HR development, academic excellence, and corporate growth (please see Annex 3: SMC Corporate Performance Model), with specific metrics including profitability, market share, alumni and faculty retention, and staff training rates.<br><br>Student outcomes remain a core focus, measured by satisfaction surveys, completion rates, learning | March 2026 |

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| | outcome achievement (with a benchmark of at least 70%), and authentic assessment results, all supported by robust student support services and accessible learning resources.<br><br>Stakeholder engagement is and will be further described through regular feedback from students, alumni, employers, and industry partners, ensuring that programs remain relevant and responsive to external needs.<br><br>Academic integrity and freedom are and will be further described by clear policies about resolution of misconduct, while resource utilization is tracked to guarantee 100% accessibility and fitness for purpose.<br><br>Monitoring methods, in the expanded and revised QAF will include additional description of annual and semi-annual program and course reviews, detailed surveys, performance appraisals, continuous data analysis, annual quality assurance reports, external audits every five years, and technology-enabled analytics for student participation and system availability. The updated QAF is further going to describe a continuous improvement cycle where data-driven insights lead to corrective actions that are communicated to all stakeholders and tracked for effectiveness, ensuring that SMC maintains a culture of quality, accountability, and excellence in all aspects of its academic and operational activities.<br><br>**see Annex 2** – Figure Flow-through overview (p.1)<br>**see Annex 2** – Flow through design process (p.2)<br>**see Annex 2** – SMC Corporate Performance Model (p.3) | |
| KR2: SMC should describe clearly what the roles of different internal and external stakeholders (including students) are in quality management, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | As part of the revised SMC Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), quality management will be described as a collaborative and integrated process involving a range of internal and external stakeholders, each with defined roles that collectively ensure the continuous improvement and accountability of academic and operational standards.<br><br>Academic Affairs and the Office of Quality Assurance serve as the central coordinators, developing and overseeing assessment plans, managing data collection and analysis, and ensuring | March 2026 |

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| | compliance with accreditation and regulatory requirements. Program Directors and Department Heads are responsible for conducting formal program and course reviews, overseeing syllabi development, managing faculty hiring and performance reviews, and implementing improvements based on assessment data and stakeholder feedback. Faculty members play a direct role in designing and delivering courses, developing syllabi, conducting assessments, participating in peer and self-assessment, and engaging in continuous professional development, all while providing feedback to students and implementing instructional improvements. Students are recognized as active participants in quality management by providing feedback through course and alumni surveys, engaging in peer and self-assessment activities, and contributing to the development of assessment criteria and program evaluations, with their input directly informing enhancements in teaching, curriculum, and support services. Administrative and support staff underpin these processes by managing student records, supporting the implementation of quality assurance activities, and ensuring that learning resources and support services are accessible and effective for a diverse student population, while the HR department focuses on staff recruitment, training, and retention.<br><br>The role of external, industry partners and employers contribute by providing input on curriculum relevance, participating in advisory boards, and offering feedback on graduate preparedness, ensuring that programs remain aligned with professional and market needs. Alumni play a vital role by offering feedback through surveys and engagement activities, supporting program assessment and networking for current students. Accrediting bodies and regulatory agencies conduct periodic reviews and audits, providing benchmarks for institutional performance and driving continuous improvement, while advisory boards composed of external experts and industry representatives offer strategic guidance and ensure alignment with evolving external expectations.<br><br>Through this integrated approach, the SMC QAF ensures that all stakeholders are actively engaged in assessment, feedback, review, and improvement cycles, fostering a culture of quality, transparency, | |

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| | and excellence across all academic and operational activities. | |
| Standard 4: | | |
| KR3: SMC should expand the Code of Ethics into a document that goes more into detail of what behaviour is or is not expected and tolerated, and what procedures are in place for addressing violations, within 18 months from the date of publication of this report | Following the conclusion of the panel's visit to SMC and prior to the release of the panel's report, SMC initiated a substantial revision and update of all documentation pertinent to ethical conduct, rules and procedures. A Code of Ethics has been drafted and approved, with other documentation subsequently aligned with the Code. It is evident that the aforementioned documents now collectively form an ethical framework, encompassing not only ethical principles and rules, but also procedures for addressing ethical misconduct. The formalisation of the new Code of Ethics is based both on best practices and examples in the higher education and research world, but also on the experience, organisational structure and practices of SMC. The Code of Ethics has now explicitly introduced SMC Ethics Committee and defined all the important aspects of work and responsibilities of the Committee.<br><br>**See Annex 3** – Code of Ethics | Completed in November 2025 |
| R1: SMC could be clearer on their website about what the PhD offer is, what degree is attached, and what a 'research area' is. | SMC will undertake a review and careful consideration of all public-facing information on its website and other communication channels regarding the PhD offer, with a view to ensuring full clarity and consistency about the degree awarded, and the status and meaning of "research areas".<br><br>SMC will carefully consider copywriting that is transparent with the fact that a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) degree is conferred upon successful completion of the program as per MFHEA-approved copy of the Certificate and that Research Areas are not separate qualifications.<br><br>A short FAQ section will also address related questions amongst other common topics. | March 2026 |
| Standard 5: | | |
| KR4: SMC should effectively monitor teaching staff on their pedagogical and didactic skills for online teaching, within 18 months | SMC will implement procedures for monitoring online pedagogical and didactic skills based on its revised, updated and improved policies. In addition to existing monitoring procedures, SMC will implement a method of structured observations (independent observation of synchronous and asynchronous class activities) and self-assessment | June 2026 |

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| from the date of publication of this report. | reports, providing recommendations to each instructor. This method will be implemented on a regular basis, as defined in the policy.<br>Based on MR5, SMC will regularly monitor teaching staff on their pedagogical and didactic skill for online learning. Please also refer to MR5. | |
| R2: SMC could make an overall analysis of the total staff qualities in order to focus its CPD offering, aligning it with the institutional strategic direction. | SMC aims to introduce a structured, institution-wide analysis of staff qualities as the basis for planning and prioritising CPD in line with its strategic direction. Considering development in areas such as online pedagogy, assessment and moderation, program management, research, third-mission activities and internationalisation, SMC will define a competency framework that sets out the key knowledge, skills and behaviours expected of its academic and, where relevant, professional staff.<br><br>SMC's HR Director will conduct a systematic skills audit drawing on staff CVs, appraisal records, teaching evaluation data, research and professional activity logs, and self-assessment surveys, to obtain a clear picture of the current strengths and development needs of the collective faculty and key administrative roles and develop an annual CPD plan that groups activities into institution-wide priorities. | September 2026 |
| Standard 6: | | |
| KR5: SMC should broaden the input used in monitoring of educational quality, beyond student satisfaction surveys, in a structural way, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | Starting in July of the next year (2026), SMC will implement additional methods for collecting input relevant to the monitoring of educational quality every third quarter of the year. This input may include student assessment data analysis, teacher feedback, and focus group organized with students and teachers. The monitoring can also include post-graduate outcomes, such as employment rates (where the data is obtainable), and student performance data, like grades and completion rates at program levels. The Quality Assurance Office and the Office of Academic Affairs are responsible for implementing the structural assessment of the quality of education. | July-Sep 2026 |
| Standard 7: | | |
| KR6: SMC should effectively support (including financial support) students' participation at relevant | SMC will open a call for financing the participation fee for research conferences for all interested students. This measure will particularly benefit Ph.D. candidates, who are expected to attend international conferences and online webinars related to their studies as part of the academic | March 2026 |

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| conferences, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | outreach requirement of the doctoral program. Additionally, for prestigious academic conferences, SMC may fully or partially fund accommodation costs with approval from the Research Coordinator Office. SMC will also announce upcoming conferences, webinars, and workshops on its Digital Campus to help students easily find relevant events. | |
| Standard 8: | | |
| KR7: SMC should define the scheme for providing psychological and career development support for students, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will provide psychological and career development support to students, alumni, and those close to completing their studies by leveraging its network of professors and professionals.<br><br>A School Counsellor and Career Development Service within HR department will be established to provide support for students pursuing guidance and assistance. The establishment of the service and its related support will be announced on the Digital Campus and SMC Alumni Association channel. To ensure ongoing visibility, a dedicated tab for the Office will be added to the Digital Campus and SMC Alumni Association channel, making it easily accessible to every student upon entering the platform. | February 2026 |
| R3: SMC could encourage student-led initiatives to organise in-person meetings by providing modest financial support. | SMC will create a light-touch scheme to support student-led in-person meetups and networking events, recognising that, in a fully online institution, opportunities to meet physically can play a crucial role in building belonging, peer support and professional networks.<br><br>SMC will set aside a modest annual budget for student micro-grants and will invite students to propose small, self-organised gatherings in their region (for example informal study circles, networking dinners or local meetups linked to programme themes), using a simple application form that sets out the purpose, expected number of participants, basic cost estimate and a short reflection on how the activity contributes to community building.<br><br>The scheme will include clear guidelines on eligibility, appropriate use of funds, and applications will be reviewed by a designated support officer. After each supported event, organisers will submit a summary and photos, which will be used both as material to showcase examples of good practice in community building on the Digital Campus and | October 2026 |

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| | social media. | |
| Standard 9: | | |
| KR8: SMC should enhance library services by providing access to additional academic databases, journals and other research resources, within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC already offers a comprehensive library opportunity for students and faculty. It provides access to leading academic services including JSTOR, and ProQuest free of charge. Additionally, the extensive virtual library at the Digital Campus features 15 reputable academic resources in one convenient, and easy to access, location with instruction on how to publish in academic journals, all in the line with SMC OER policy. Furthermore, SMC offers all students free access to LinkedIn Learn and Viva Learn – two of the world's largest online training and professional development providers.<br><br>SMC will introduce and enable additional library services free of charge for the students, by making available subscriptions and access to additional academic databases, including Springer Link, Science Direct, and other options currently in evaluation.<br><br>SMC will closely monitor usage data, access rates, and behaviour to optimize the range and availability of relevant resources for each program, its outcomes, and MQF level. | April 2026 |
| KR9: SMC should ensure that students have free access to all library services; this should be implemented within 6 months from the date of publication of this report. | All students at SMC have been having free access to JSTOR, ProQuest, LinkedIn Learn, Viva Learn, and other extensive resources on the Digital Campus.<br><br>In alignment with the actions taken as per KR8, all students at SMC will continue to have free access to all available libraries and Research Databases, including those to be introduced and made available in the future.<br><br>Further to the monitoring process as per KR8, SMC will involve students in the selection process and collect evaluation of the offered resources to improve and enhance future solutions. | April 2026 and ongoing |
| Standard 10: | | |
| | | |
| | | |

| Standard 11: | | |
|---|---|---|
| KR10: SMC should take into account the impact staff has on society when evaluating their work, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | As part of its existing staff evaluation procedures, SMC will formalise an explicit policy regarding the impact of its staff on society. As SMC staff are dispersed across several continents, the impact can predominantly be measured globally, but also locally when staff are involved in local industries or settings. The policy evaluation will focus on key criteria that are already in place and demonstrable at SMC: international cooperation, specific contributions to community via accessibility of knowledge, global impact via academic writing and other public appearances by prominent SMC professors, inclusivity of education for developing countries (low-income countries), and accessibility of educational services and impact for special social groups, such as disadvantaged, oppressed or socially rehabilitating individuals (inmates). | June 2026 |
| KR11: SMC should strengthen links with employers and members of professions, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | SMC will strengthen connections and partnerships with employers and professionals in Malta and other countries to promote industry collaboration and provide more opportunities for students and graduates. This will be achieved through a memorandum of understanding to initiate closer cooperation with industry partners. | Sep 2026 |
| KR12: SMC should include alumni in the activities aimed at the development of the institution, within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | So far, SMC has only a few alumni, stretched across continents that can be included in the institutional development. SMC will organise a call for all interested alumni to take participation in the sessions and deliberation regarding the institutional development that will be organised by the SMC. This will be announced at SMC Digital Campus as well as at SMC Alumni Association channel. | Sep 2026 |

Annex List

Annex 1 – SMC Pedagogical Methods
Annex 2 – KR1
Annex 3 – SMC Code of Ethics
Annex 4 – SMC Faculty Handbook

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Review Panel Bio Notes

### Chair of the Panel:

**Dr Milan Pol** is Professor of Education and, in 2014-2022, he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic). At this faculty he is head of the doctoral programme of Educational Sciences. Dr Pol's professional interests are leadership in education and evaluation in education. In the field of evaluation, he has been invited to evaluations arranged by ENQA and has been the head or the member of evaluating panels such as QAA (UK), FINEEC (Finland) and SQAA-NAKVIS (Slovenia). He frequently participates in institutional/programme evaluations in higher education internationally (Estonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, UAE, and more). In 2010-2016 Dr Pol was a member of the Accreditation Commission of Slovakia. He is author of numerous publications (https://www.muni.cz/en/people/75-milan-pol/publications) and works as editor-in-chief of *Studia Paedagogica*, a Scopus-databased journal. He is a former chair (2004-2005, 2022-2023) of the European Network for Improving Research and Development in Educational Leadership and Management (ENIRDELM). In 2023, Dr Pol was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Latvia.

### Peer reviewer:

**Mr Eltjo Bazen** has been working in quality assurance of higher education since 2011. He currently works as Chief Product Owner Quality Assurance at HU UAS Utrecht (NL). Mr Bazen is part of various networks and committees concerning quality and quality assurance in higher education, both Dutch and European. He is active in several auditing roles, such as a chair of internal auditing panels at HU UAS Utrecht, chair of panels of institutional audit abroad and as assessor in EFQM. Though Mr Bazen loves innovative ideas and experimenting, his firm belief is that the best way to improve is openness and the willingness to learn from each other. Mr Bazen's educational background is in Philosophy, Business Management and Quality Management. His activities in quality assurance are a perfect combination of his love for education and the fields of philosophy and business and quality management.

Student reviewer:

**Ms Milica Kavedžić** is an expert in higher education quality assurance, currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ACQAHE) in Montenegro. In this role, she ensures that Montenegro's higher education system complies with European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), manages international relations, and leads research initiatives to enhance the national education framework.

As Montenegro's representative in the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), Ms Kavedžić contributes to the ongoing monitoring and development of the Bologna Process. Her career includes diverse roles such as Officer for International Relations at ACQAHE, Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister, and PR Manager at the Montenegrin Pavilion at Expo Milano. Ms Kavedžić also has extensive experience in project management, having successfully developed EU funding applications, overseen project implementation, and managed reporting processes.

Ms Kavedžić holds a degree in Economics from the University of Montenegro, where she graduated as the top student in her class. She has participated in exchange programmes at the Vienna University of Economics and Business, and is currently pursuing postgraduate studies to further expand her expertise in economics and quality assurance.

Annex 2: Agenda of the Onsite Visit

# EQA Audit Agenda:
# Signum Magnum College (SMC)

**Date: 9th, 10th and 11th June 2025**

**Venue: Signature Portomaso Business Centre, Portomaso, St Julian's, STJ 4011, Malta**

| Day I - 9th June | Meetings |
|---|---|
| 8.30 | MFHEA EQA panel preparation meeting for Day 1 of the institutional audit |
| 9.00 | Owner/CEO/President and member of Board of Directors |
| 10.00 | Internal meeting |
| 10.15 | Head of Institution and member of Board of Directors |
| 11.15 | Internal meeting |
| 11.30 | Director of Quality/Audit facilitator and member of Board of Directors |
| 12.30 | Internal meeting / lunch break |
| 13.30 | Heads of programmes levels 6-7 |
| 14.00 | Heads of programmes level 8 |
| 14.30 | Internal meeting |
| 14.45 | Administration / Student support service / HR / Financial and accounting / Business development and international Relations / IT |
| 15.45 | Internal meeting |
| 16.00 | Academic affairs / Faculty / Research coordination |
| 16.45 | Internal meeting |
| 17.00 | Close day 1 |

| Day II - 10th June | |
|---|---|
| 8.30 | MFHEA EQA panel preparation meeting for Day 2 of the institutional audit |
| 9.00 | **Lecturers levels 6-7** |
| 10.00 | Internal meeting |
| 10.15 | **Students levels 6-7** |
| 11.15 | Internal meeting |
| 11.30 | **Students level 8** |
| 12.30 | Internal meeting - lunch break |
| 13.30 | **Lecturers level 8 and supervisors** |
| 14.30 | Internal meeting |
| 14.45 | **IT - Virtual tour of the online platform** |
| 16.30 | Internal meeting |
| 17.00 | Close day 2 |

| Day III - 11th June | |
|---|---|
| 8.30 | MFHEA EQA panel preparation meeting for Day 3 of the institutional audit |
| 10.15 | **Alumni levels 6-7** |
| 11.15 | Internal meeting |
| 11.30 | **Doctoral Committee** |
| 12.30 | Internal meeting / lunch break |
| 13.30 | **Alumni level 8** |
| 14.00 | **Any other meeting for any clarifications**<br><br>Panel consultation |
| 15.45 | Presentation of initial findings |
| 16.00 | Close day 3 |

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