

Progress in Developing a National Quality Management System for Higher Education in Oman

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ABSTRACT: *The postsecondary education sector in Oman consists of a complex suite of public and private institutions, in a number of distinct segments, offering local and foreign programmes developed through their respective quality assurance systems. The Omani higher education quality management system is undergoing significant advances to address this situation. Some of these advances are briefly outlined in this paper. Infrastructural policies and frameworks, institutional and programme standards and quality assurance processes and a range of quality enhancement activities are all in progress. Experience shows that the methods used to develop national frameworks and processes are, in themselves, vital factors in the success of those frameworks and processes. Most particularly, benchmarking and consultation have proven effective when complemented with training and support strategies, sourced internationally and – of increasing importance – locally.*

Keywords: Oman; national system; quality assurance; qualification framework; standards; quality audit; accreditation; foundation programme; training; network

Introduction

Higher education provision in the Sultanate of Oman has undergone strong growth in a relatively short period of time. Prior to 1970 there was no formal post secondary education. For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘higher education’ shall be used synonymously with formal post secondary education. In 2008, there are over sixty institutions providing post secondary diploma and/or degree programmes, serving a total population of over 2.34 million people (Ministry of National Economy, 2003 Census). Two thirds of these are public institutions, operated through various Ministries, particularly Higher Education, Manpower, Health and Defence.

Since the mid 1990s, and in order to cope with the rapid escalation in demand for higher education, much of the growth in capacity has been in the private sector. The Government developed a model whereby locally owned institutions could offer foreign programmes in conjunction with credible international affiliate universities, which confer the degrees. In addition to Oman’s own diploma and degree programmes, there are now over 200 diploma and degree programmes currently on offer in Oman, sourced from over a dozen countries.

Capacity to accommodate demand for higher education places remains a challenge. In 2007/2008, there were 47,607 applicants for fully or partially government funded places; 14,151 (29.7%) received offers for fully or partially funded places (HEAC, 2008). About 2,500 additional places were made available on a private fee-paying basis, although many of these were not taken up. Capacity continues to grow, particularly as more private providers

and programmes come on stream, but so too does demand and the social culture has not yet fully embraced private fees as a desirable option for closing this gap.

Indeed, the importing of programmes has been a very successful strategy for rapidly expanding the sector. However, “one of the consequences is that Oman imported not only a diverse range of educational opportunities, but also a diverse range of quality assurance systems, including wide variances in standards, data, approval mechanisms, transnational quality assurance mechanisms and transparency” (Razvi & Carroll, 2007, p. 2). Combined with the developing local provision, this resulted in a post secondary education sector with constraints on its ability to strategically maximise the potential benefits from its newfound capacity. Greater systematisation of the sector was required.

In 2001, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said established (Royal Decree No. 74/2001) the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC), sending a very clear signal to the sector about the importance to be placed on the quality of higher education. The OAC is tasked with accrediting institutions and programmes through the use of standards, information, reviews and quality improvement processes, and with maintaining the national qualifications framework.

In 2006, the OAC Board commissioned an international consultant to undertake an analysis of progress to date, and to make recommendations for further development. The result of this analysis was drawn up into a draft *Plan for Omani Higher Education Quality Management System* (OAC, 2006), commonly known as the *Quality Plan*. This paper details some of the extensive progress made by the OAC over the past two years against four strategic areas in the *Quality Plan*:

- infrastructural policies and frameworks;
- institutional quality assurance;
- programme quality assurance; and
- quality enhancement and capability development.

Infrastructural Policies & Frameworks

International benchmarking carried out by the OAC suggests that in order for a national quality management system to operate effectively, a number of infrastructural policies and frameworks are required. In Oman these include, but are not limited to, a national qualifications framework, a standard classification of fields of study, an institutional classification framework, and a bilingual glossary to assist the sector with the plethora of terms used in higher education quality management.

The methods used to develop and approve these frameworks are, in themselves, an important factor in the development of the quality management system as a whole. Brief critical analyses of the development of three frameworks are provided below, in the chronological order of their introduction. They demonstrate three successive stages in framework development, each one building upon lessons learned from the preceding effort. The first case concerns the national qualifications framework and shows the advantages and limitations of importing frameworks as an initial step. The second case discusses the development of a standard classification of educational framework and highlights some advantages and disadvantages of seeking greater customisation to the local context. The third case summarises a current initiative to develop a bilingual quality glossary, and considers the potential to address this and other such frameworks at a regional, rather than national, level.

Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF)

Oman's first post secondary qualifications framework (the OQF) was approved in 2005. The OQF sets out the criteria for qualifications that will be recognised in Oman. The key criteria are qualification nomenclature; quantum of study (measured in credit hours or credit points) and generic descriptors of learning outcomes at each level of study. It was modelled upon an American design, being based on a four-year bachelor's degree followed by a one or two-year master's degree.

A legacy issue to be addressed was the wide range of programmes that had already been brought into Oman from different countries. A process of tailoring (which included consultation with the sector) was required to ensure that the OQF could accommodate these programs. One key result of this process was that credit hour and credit point options were added to enable programmes using either of these two systems to be mapped onto the framework. Another key result was that the OQF was simplified in a number of ways. Types of qualifications that didn't exist in Oman, or were deemed unlikely to exist in the foreseeable future, were omitted. Conceptual distinctions between different types of the same qualification, such as research postgraduate degrees compared with taught postgraduate degrees, or higher education bachelor's degrees compared with technical education bachelor's degrees, were ignored.

The greatest advantage of importing a framework was the speed with which it could be put in place. Importing from a developed higher education sector engenders confidence in its value. In the first iteration of a new national strategy, in which new concepts are being learned as they are being implemented, such confidence can greatly reduce consultation and approval timeframes, leading to quick implementation.

In the absence of proper contextualisation, however, this confidence can be over relied upon. Einstein is paraphrased as saying that everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. That axiom was borne out in Oman's experience: in the course of being rendered simple, the OQF was possibly over-simplified. Two examples follow.

The narrow range of qualifications and the insistence on a four-year bachelor's degree resulted in many exceptions to the framework requiring attention. Many of these exceptions were legacy issues – non-compliant degree programmes that had been introduced to Oman prior to the OQF being approved. However, national frameworks and policies need to be linked to ensure that they are effective in going forward. The continuing policy of bringing in three-year degree programmes from credible foreign universities (or, in the case of England, three-year honours programs) is in conflict with the four year degree programme requirement; under the current rules, such programs need to be extended to four years or reclassified as higher diplomas.

A national qualifications framework has implications beyond its primary purpose. For example, staff promotions are linked to qualifications that are recognised on the framework, meaning that a systemic disincentive exists for staff to undertake useful professional development that leads to a qualification not recognised on the framework. A graduate certificate in higher education, which is an increasingly popular qualification for university faculty in many countries, would not be recognised on the OQF and therefore is, currently, a lost opportunity.

The introduction of an OQF was a vital step in the development of the overall system. Clearly, the system needs to be both more flexible and more integrated with other national strategies. These challenges require a systematic solution more sophisticated than the import of a foreign framework, and will be addressed through a review commencing in 2008.

Oman Standard Classification of Education Framework (OSCED)

A standard classification of education is a framework used to classify all subjects that can be studied. Its primary purpose is to facilitate the collection and analysis of statistical information about education provision, although it has a wide range of other uses, such as identifying gaps in education provision.

In 2006 the need for a standard classification of education framework was identified, partly through benchmarking foreign national higher education systems to identify the core elements of an effective system, and partly as a predictable consequence of the increasing complexity in national data requirements.

As with the OQF, a process of international benchmarking was undertaken. However, for this project a national working group was convened to ensure that sectoral concerns informed the benchmarking process itself, rather than being limited to reacting to the benchmarking results. The working group took cognisance of the *International Standard Classification of Education Framework* (ISCED), developed by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1997). However, this framework was becoming dated and lacked the sophistication and comprehensiveness of other systems. Based on its experience with the OQF, Oman was careful to not oversimplify its standard classification framework. After considering nearly twenty national classification frameworks, the Australian solution (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) was settled upon as the benchmark. Of particular merit in this framework was its robust structure. It consists of Broad Fields of study demarcated by common theoretical constructs and purpose; each including a number of Narrow Fields demarcated by the object of interest; which, in turn, each include a number of Detailed Fields demarcated by the methods, techniques and tools of study. The Australian framework was then 'Omanised' through further consultation with the sector, including other ministries that may have an interest in the application of such a framework, such as the Ministry of National Economy.

One of the major findings of this consultation was a confirmation that frameworks are value-laden rather than value-free, and therefore certainly not universal constants. This is particularly challenging, when dealing with what is in theory, an ontologically-constructed framework with profound epistemological ramifications. Such frameworks can be influenced by the way disciplines are culturally conceptualised; treatments of concepts by different languages; the different approaches used for constructing national frameworks and policies (based on perceived need, customary practice and applied competencies); national priorities for knowledge development; and the way they are utilised by governments and institutions.

Some of these challenges were relatively easily accommodated, such as the re-ordering of fields of study at the same level, to give the perception of prominence to localised issues. For example, the order in which the Narrow Fields of English and Arabic were listed was reversed from the benchmark so that Arabic comes first. This makes no difference to the conceptual structure, but provides greater comfort for users in Oman, at the acceptable cost of adding

some further complexity to the conversion tables, which are required for maintaining international comparability.

Other examples are more challenging, and range from a reluctance to recognise fields of study as legitimate, such as wine making, to a conflict between theological and ontological approaches to the structuring of fields of study, which would imply not only reordering fields of study within the same level, such as the Narrow Field, but vertically from one level to another, such as making Islamic Studies a Narrow Field, or even a Broad Field, rather than a Detailed Field.

The challenge is to contextualise OSCED without compromising its conceptual integrity or functional resemblance to international benchmarks. The fact that complex conceptual issues, such as those mentioned above, are emerging in the debate about this contextualisation is an encouraging indication of the growing sophistication of Oman's approach to systems development.

English-Arabic Glossary of Quality-related terms

Language reflects and influences praxis. Quality management in Omani higher education cannot be pursued only in English, as this would disenfranchise much of the sector. Similarly, it cannot occur only in Arabic, because many of the programmes are taught in English, and because much of the existing knowledge about quality management has been developed in English.

One of the projects the OAC has recently commenced is the development of an English-Arabic glossary of the many terms used in higher education quality management. The method involves: identifying the terms in English and Arabic; agreeing upon conceptual definitions in English and Arabic; and providing contextual and linguistic boundaries for each definition. This is challenging in a single language, because many terms have multiple meanings internationally, and some of these meanings are in conflict with each other. It is considerably more challenging in two languages, because one must add linguistic and cultural differences in conceptualisation and expression.

The project involves a team which is currently assembling a wide range of quality-related glossaries. The *Analytic Quality Glossary* endorsed by INQAAHE (Harvey, 2004-2006) has been taken as the starting point, along with literature already produced by the OAC.

It is acknowledged that the English speaking world is further advanced in its higher education quality management than the Arab speaking world. However, an important factor in this project is to ensure that the development of the glossary does not assume that all authoritative quality terms will be found in the English language. For example, the concepts of a 'Royal Decree' (مرسوم سلطاني) and a 'Ministerial Decision' (قرار وزاري) play a significant role in quality management in Arab countries, and have no direct equivalents in western higher education. Similarly, there are English terms, such as 'quality' and 'probation', which as yet have no direct Arabic translation. A primary conclusion from this is that quality management concepts do not easily translate – let alone transfer – from one country to another and, therefore, significant emphasis on developing mutual understanding between cultures is an essential aspect of international quality management.

An opportunity exists to take this project to a regional level. Arabian countries have been watching with interest the progress in Europe with the Bologna Accord. The rationale behind that Accord and its subsequent agreements could be equally shared between many Arabian countries – particularly the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). There is a significant amount of student and worker mobility between the GCC member countries. This mobility would be greatly facilitated by common quality assurance frameworks, such as a common qualifications framework and standard education classification. However, given that Arab countries are at earlier stages of development in higher education quality management compared with Europe, an appropriate first phase of collaboration for Arabian countries may be the development of a common glossary.

The establishment of the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education provides a potential mechanism for pursuing this and other such propositions. Concerns about regional collaboration include that the time to completion would be longer; the process would highlight potential areas of disagreement as much as areas of agreement; and the result may be a glossary that represents the lowest common denominator (that is, what all member countries could agree upon) rather than leading edge thinking and praxis. It is inevitable that some terms will not achieve a common meaning throughout the GCC, at least in the short term, simply because they are concomitant with variances in national structures or systems. However, advantages might include achieving improved communication and greater collaboration on other frameworks and quality assurance processes, potentially leading to a more rapid development of the sector and the social and economic benefits that this would engender.

It is anticipated that progress on the development of a national – and perhaps regional – English-Arabic Glossary can be reported early in 2009.

Institutional Quality Assurance

Between 2001 and 2004, OAC prepared, with international assistance, a set of standards for higher education institutions (HEIs) and processes for institutional and programme accreditation. These were collated, along with the first iterations of the OQF and an institutional classification system, and published as the *Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance* (ROSQA) (OAC, 2004).

All HEIs were invited to apply for accreditation in accordance with ROSQA. The invitation caused some unease in the sector, because most HEIs were unfamiliar with the standards and unprepared for accreditation. Four HEIs submitted their applications. Due in part to limitations in workload capacity at the newly established OAC, and in part to a preliminary assessment of the applications, two were selected for the full accreditation process. These took place between 2004 and 2006. One institution was awarded Provisional Accreditation, a precursor to full accreditation, and the other was not accredited.

These results and feedback from the sector led the OAC Board to commission the previously-mentioned comprehensive review of ROSQA and relevant regulations and decrees in 2006. The review concluded, amongst other things, that the sector found the institutional standards to be too difficult to meet given the sector's stage of development; introduced with insufficient consultation with the sector; and inadequately tailored to the Omani context. Most of HEIs were not ready for accreditation and required training and support in order to design and build internal quality management systems. Proceeding without changing the

system presented the OAC with two unpalatable options: (a) to lower morale in the sector by failing many HEIs; or (b) to lower the standards, thereby weakening the purpose of accreditation.

After further consultation and international benchmarking for appropriate solutions to this conundrum, a new system was proposed whereby HEI institutional accreditation would consist of two stages: quality audit (a formative evaluation against goals), followed some years later by standards assessment (a summative assessment against external standards). This system creates a developmental pathway towards international standards, whilst maintaining an appropriate balance with the need for public accountability.

Institutional Quality Audit

Starting from 2008, the first stage in Institutional Accreditation involves each HEI undergoing a quality audit. The emphasis of quality audit is on evaluating the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance and quality enhancement processes against its own stated goals and objectives, as well as requirements set by Government and other external sources (such as professional bodies or affiliate institutions). Quality audit is useful for determining the HEI's capacity and capability to achieve its aspirations and to continually improve. It involves a self-study of the HEI's activities, resulting in a *Quality Audit Portfolio*, and then external verification of that Portfolio by an external Audit Panel convened by the OAC. The Panel produces a public *Quality Audit Report* containing, amongst other things, commendations, affirmations and recommendations. There are no pass or fail results, grading, certification or other summative results from a quality audit. This model is based upon numerous international examples, including that of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

The introduction of quality audit as a concept initially met with a mixed reaction from the sector. At one end of the spectrum, institutions were resistant to quality audit because they were focused on having accredited institution status, particularly for use in promotional campaigns. At the other end, HEIs were of the view that it was too soon to introduce any form of independent review. Neither of these two extremes was informed by robust self-assessments; the national study mentioned earlier established that internal reviews and information tracking within institutions were rare. To address these concerns, international experts, from countries with mature quality audit systems, held numerous workshops with the sector on quality audit and on related quality enhancement and quality assurance strategies and tools. The workshops were specifically designed to ensure that participants were able to contribute, discuss and debate new ideas in the context of the Omani sector. Also, extensive consultation was undertaken in the development of the quality audit process. Evaluations conducted at these workshops indicated that they have been helpful in promoting deeper awareness of the issues, and in fostering constructive collaboration within the sector.

The OAC released its *Quality Audit Manual* (OAC, 2008a) in March, 2008. In order to make the quality audit process as transparent as possible, the manual jointly targets institutions and external review panels. In addition to detailing the protocols and processes for external quality audits of HEIs, the manual also provides a range of tools to assist institutions with their preparations for audit.

In order to ensure that quality audits are undertaken by persons with appropriate skills and experience, a Register of External Reviewers has been established. To qualify for

membership on the Register, a person must meet certain criteria, evaluated through a rigorous refereeing process, and either participate in the OAC's two-day training programme or have equivalent experience or training in review methods from another recognised jurisdiction. The Register currently includes 59 members from within Oman, nominated by local HEIs, and 62 from outside the Sultanate, invited largely through connections with other external quality agencies. The OAC's quality audit panels are comprised exclusively from persons listed on the Register. Each panel includes members from inside and outside Oman. For the first few years the balance will emphasise international membership, although as local reviewers gain experience it is expected that this balance will alter.

The involvement of local and international experts in Omani quality assurance is both essential and challenging. Higher education in Oman is a developing sector. As such, an empathy with the social, political and economic contexts, and the manner in which these contexts facilitate and limit developmental opportunities, is vital. At the same time, the Omani sector desires parity of esteem within the international higher education community. Quality audit provides an organic pathway to parity, although it is acknowledged that more summative comparisons will eventually also be required, such as assessment against tangible international or regional standards.

Two pilot quality audits were conducted in 2008. These provided an opportunity to test the processes set out in the *Quality Audit Manual*, and proved that they can be effectively used in Oman. In recognition of the developmental stage of both the quality audit process and the participating institutions, it was agreed that the portfolios and resulting reports from the pilot quality audits would not be released publicly. However, for full quality audits the resulting Reports are made public in order to satisfy the demands for public accountability that are concomitant with a credible quality assurance system and encouraged, in manners appropriate to the local context, by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE, 2007).

An ambitious national schedule has been published on the OAC website (www.oac.gov.om). It timetables the quality audits of sixty-three HEIs over a six year period. The first audits have commenced and the public reports are expected by early 2009.

Commensurate with international guidelines, the OAC's quality audits will be subject to an appeals process. An Appeals Manual (OAC, 2008b) was produced in accordance with the INQAAHE guidelines and using the OAC's usual processes of international benchmarking and consultation with the sector.

Institutional Standards Assessment

The second stage in Institutional Accreditation involves the HEI undergoing a Standards Assessment. The emphasis of Standards Assessment is on empirically measuring whether an HEI has met the institutional quality standards published by the OAC. The first set of these standards was published in ROSQA, and was the basis on which the scope of topics for quality audit was established. An updated version of these standards will be published prior to the first Standards Assessments being undertaken.

Institutions which satisfy the standards will be awarded accredited status; institutions which do not will be placed on a probationary status to provide them time to address the OAC's recommendations prior to a reassessment.

Programme Quality Assurance

In Oman's new system, institutions and programmes undergo separate quality assurance processes. This is in order to ensure that their distinctive quality assurance issues are given due attention. All programmes, whether developed and awarded locally or through foreign providers, must be licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education before accepting student enrolments. The process of licensure is currently undergoing a significant evolution from bureaucratic registration to being a peer-driven, standards-based form of approval.

Programme Accreditation

Oman's first attempts at Programme Accreditation involved HEIs sending their programme curriculum and self assessment to one or two international academicians for review. The review process included a site visit and interviews with staff and students. The result was a report with recommendations for programme improvement and a decision about the accreditation status of the programme. This output was certainly valuable, but also highly subjective and therefore too contestable for an accreditation system. The aforementioned review of ROSQA concluded that this process could be improved in two ways. Firstly, a larger number of academicians was required to ensure a broader and more balanced perspective. Secondly, a set of programme standards could be developed to ensure that peer opinion was grounded in common, explicit and internationally benchmarked academic standards. Just as a student expects to know on what basis their learning will be assessed, an institution needs to know against which standards their programmes will be accredited. These improvements would lead to greater consistency in accreditation decisions, thereby leading to greater public confidence in the system and the benefits that flow from this, such as greater student mobility and employability.

The new process for Programme Accreditation, still in draft form, involves a self-assessment prepared by the HEI against the appropriate OAC standards and then consideration of that self-study, and the programme curriculum, by an appropriately qualified panel of External Reviewers drawn from the OAC's Register. Oman does not currently have its own programme standards. Student learning standards for Narrow Fields of Study are being developed through a collaborative process of working groups, comprised of national and international academic, professional and industry experts. Where possible, the working groups source current and appropriate international standards, such as ABET Inc. for engineering, and contextualise these for Oman. The development of programme standards is intended to guide the processes of curriculum development, programme licensing and programme accreditation.

Programme Recognition

An interesting feature of the Omani higher education sector is the large number of foreign programmes being provided through local institutions. For these, the OAC is looking to develop an alternate quality assurance system called Programme Recognition. The rationale is that these programmes have already been quality assured by a credible external quality agency according to the standards in their place of origin, this being a condition for bringing the programme into Oman, and have been brought to Oman precisely because they are valued in that form. To insist that these programmes conform to a second set of standards, which are potentially in conflict with the first, may damage their integrity. So, the quality assurance

process in Oman involves examining the extent to which the programme, subject to any appropriate contextualisations, is maintaining the standards by which it is legitimately approved in its place of origin.

National Standards for General Foundation Programs

General Foundation Programme (GFP) standards are the first academic standards to have been developed in Oman. These standards apply to a diverse range of foundation programs, which were introduced by HEIs to raise the academic capabilities of students prior to their entrance into higher education and have a vital role to play in preparing students for their programmes of study in Oman. During the academic year 2006/2007, 88-per cent of students accepted for places to study at HEIs participated in some level of general foundation programme (Carroll, 2007). There are, however, almost as many GFPs as there are institutions; some programmes have been specifically tailored to prepare students for science or business-based diploma or degree programmes whereas others focus primarily on the development of English language skills. GFPs do not earn credit points towards a diploma or a degree and, up until now, have not come under either higher education or post secondary quality management systems. Despite conflicting views about the causes underlying the current need for General Foundation Programmes, the Ministry of Education has been taking steps to bridge the gap between school leavers and the skills required to succeed in higher programmes of study but this will take time.

There is no mechanism currently in place to assess the quality and effectiveness of GFPs. The development of GFP standards is intended to guide HEIs in developing their programmes, provide information to the public about the learning outcomes of GFPs and set the benchmark against which the programmes will be accredited by OAC review panels. Having common GFP standards will bridge discrepancies in Foundation programmes, ensuring that all students receive the opportunities to develop the required skills, and will create a shared vision of what students need and what they are expected to do in a GFP in preparation for higher education.

To enable students to fully prepare for all aspects of their future studies, GFP standards have been developed in English, Mathematics, IT and Study Skills. The four areas have been chosen on the advice of academic staff in Oman, international literature, such as the Report of the UK's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997) and other international benchmarks. These key areas indicate the breadth of knowledge a student will need to succeed in higher education, looking towards generic graduate attributes and future employability.

A standards working group was formed for each area of study, comprised of academics from Oman, representing both the public and private sectors, with input from prominent international academics. The remit of each working group was to focus on the two key aspects of programme standards: the intended student learning outcomes and provision of resources directly related to the attainment of those outcomes. The learning outcomes focused on what a learner completing a particular programme or course of study should know and be able to do. The starting point for producing the learning outcomes was Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, a conceptual framework which provided the pedagogic underpinning for the development of different levels of cognitive skills.

One of the challenges in the process of developing programme standards was to devise learning outcomes which were both meaningful and measurable. For example, many English

language programmes at Foundation level had been based on published text books. This has often led to learning outcomes being written simply as a list of grammatical structures, reflecting the widespread tendency for language courses to neglect the development of thinking skills (Waters, 2006). International benchmarking, with standards developed by agencies such as the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), USA (2006), and consultation with leading professionals in the field identified through the relevant literature and professional networks provided a way forward, by offering examples of comprehensive yet measurable language learning outcomes.

As part of the consultative process, the draft sets of GFP standards were discussed at a national two-day symposium and on web-based discussion boards. This collaborative approach to developing standards maximised opportunities for key stakeholders to contribute to the debate and enabled a consensus to be reached, thereby maximising stakeholder buy-in. The limitation of this approach, however, is that there is a tendency toward attaining the lowest common denominator rather than international best practice (Coglianese, 2001, Wideman, 2002) even if this is not the intended outcome (Patterson, 1993). The academic standards set the minimum requirements that programmes of study are expected to attain. HEIs offering international programmes may require students to achieve higher standards than those specified for the GFP.

A Ministerial Decision (72/2008) was issued in June 2008, stating that the General Foundation Programme standards should be adopted by all public and private higher education institutions throughout Oman by the 2009-2010 academic year. A process for accrediting Foundation Programmes is currently under development.

Institutions now have the task of developing GFPs which meet the needs of their students and ensure quality by meeting minimum national programme standards. Standards, however, are not curricula: "It is the responsibility of each HEI to develop the curriculum, teach and assess students, and review and improve its GFP curriculum in line with the requirements of these standards" (MoHE & OAC, 2008, p. 4). Standards are not intended to stifle creativity and innovation. This presents a new challenge for the sector; professional development and training will be needed to support academic staff in preparing and evaluating appropriate curricula for their students in all four areas.

Quality Enhancement

One of the most significant findings of the previously-mentioned analysis that led to the development of the *Quality Plan* was that the sector was enthusiastic about implementing appropriate quality assurance processes but suffered from a lack of quality assurance know-how. The development of this know-how was stymied by a competitive culture across public and private providers, which prevented constructive collaboration and sharing of good practices. Therefore, it was apparent that any attempt by government to improve the national quality assurance system would be significantly bolstered by a corresponding commitment to collaborative quality enhancement strategies. Several such strategies are identified in the *Quality Plan*. Two discussed in this paper are the National Quality Training Programme (NQTP) and the Oman Quality Network (OQN).

National Quality Training Program

Attainment of accreditation is like attainment of a degree – it requires hard work and demonstrable results. Some guidance towards this accomplishment comes from having clear and transparent standards, much like a textbook can guide students, but like textbooks, standards are insufficient. Guidance can come also from peer support, expert input and collaborative activities.

A National Quality Training Programme (NQTP) was established jointly between the OAC and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The NQTP provides interactive workshops to representatives from each institution on topics directly related to the revised quality management system, such as: strategic planning; ADRI (a cyclical quality assurance model for self reviews & external reviews, focusing on the four stages of Approach → Deployment → Results → Improvement); risk management; and using statistics in reporting. In the first instance, the topics were selected based upon an analysis of the gap between the sector's skills and the requirements of the *Quality Plan*. Persons with expertise in quality management, from countries with significant experience in operating quality management systems, were invited to lead these workshops.

The NQTP has been very successful as a direct training method. Evaluations by participants rate the workshops consistently positively. The evaluation survey includes a summary question: “overall, this workshop was excellent”. Using a 1-5 Likert-type scale, with 5 being optimal, this item had an aggregated mean response of 4.26 (± 0.7) after seven workshops. The qualitative responses show that the participants particularly appreciated and benefited from the regular opportunities to interact and form collegial relationships with peers in other HEIs (Carroll & Palermo, 2006).

In order to cope with the considerable demand for training within 63 HEIs, plus a number of Ministries, the NQTP employed a “train-the-trainer” approach. Using this approach, representatives from each HEI and Ministry attended the initial workshops for each topic, and were then encouraged to run the workshops within their place of work. To facilitate this approach, all presentation and handout materials are made available on the OAC website (www.oac.gov.om/qe/training). There are currently 16 training modules online. The first was posted in September 2006. Web statistics show that these resources have, in total up until July 2008, been downloaded over 20,000 times. This is an impressive indicator of interest. However, it does not indicate the success of the train-the-trainer approach.

In March 2008, a workshop was held to explore the train-the-trainer concept in more detail. Most of the 150 participants indicated that they had not pursued this approach. The primary reasons were twofold: (a) workload/resource pressures, and (b) a perception of a lack of depth of knowledge and confidence necessary in delivering the training modules to their colleagues. Given that the attendance at NQTP events remains high, it is probable that the second reason is the more potent.

Strategies for addressing the points noted in (b) above were explored at the workshop and are now underway. They include: a conceptual approach to understanding the role of the participant trainer in the train-the-trainer method; Arabic translations of the workshop materials; circulation of the materials in advance of the initial workshops; and more strategic selection of the initial participants to improve the likelihood that they will return to their workplaces as enthusiastic participant trainers.

The next major steps in the NQTP are to transfer responsibility for it from central government agencies (OAC and MoHE) to a network of the sector itself, and to make greater use of local expertise in designing and providing the initial workshops. To achieve this requires a formalised national network, and this is the subject of the second quality enhancement strategy.

Oman Quality Network

As mentioned earlier, one of the findings of the sectoral analysis was the lack of collaboration as a result of the increasing competitiveness of the sector. Upon closer examination, the issue of competitiveness being a barrier to collaboration was more perceptual than tangible, and therefore not an insurmountable obstacle. A greater obstacle was that there were almost no structural opportunities for representatives from the HEIs – particularly those with specific responsibilities for coordinating quality assurance processes or promoting quality enhancement activities – to meet and share problems and solutions.

In response, the OQN was established as a collegial and independent, not-for-profit network of HEIs, the MoHE, and the OAC. According to its Chairperson, the OQN is concerned with developing:

“...a strong and vibrant higher education sector by improving quality in higher education within the Sultanate of Oman. It aims to build a quality conscious, knowledge rich higher education sector through the sharing of ideas, strategies, research, and practices that inform the pursuit of quality improvement” (Heming, 2007).

The OQN includes two representatives from each HEI and is led by an Executive Committee elected from amongst the representatives. It was launched under the patronage of Her Excellency the Minister for Higher Education, in September 2006. This high level endorsement provides the legitimacy essential for such initiatives in Oman. The supportive rather than directive nature of this Patronage is of particular strategic importance; it sends a clear signal that the OQN is a collegial rather than hierarchical entity.

The OQN has been active in several regards. In most instances, it is the OQN representatives who attend the NQTP workshops. In order to maximise the potential for pan-sectoral collaboration, the OQN is now assuming full responsibility for the NQTP. Also, in October 2008 it held the inaugural Oman National Quality Conference, providing an opportunity for member institutions to showcase a wide range of good practices. The number of submissions was more than double the available spaces, indicating a strong level of enthusiasm within the sector for this initiative.

The OQN has also served as a valuable sounding board for the OAC as it develops various aspects of the national system. Drafts of new manuals, such as the *Quality Audit Manual* or the *Appeals Manual*, are circulated to the OQN for comment, and workshops are held with OQN representatives to explain the drafts and seek constructive feedback.

The introduction of an OQN has not been without its challenges. It involves concepts and practices that are not entirely consistent with normal aspects of the prevailing culture and traditions. For example, as an informal network it seeks to use email communication rather

than the more formal process of official letters that must follow particular protocols for approval and dissemination. Also, the OQN is designed to make decisions by consensus; however, the national culture favours bureaucracies and hierarchical structures in which decisions are made by those in a higher level. So, in the early stages the Executive Committee acted in keeping with prevailing practices rather than in accordance with the OQN Guidelines. A valuable lesson learned was that the introduction of concepts and structures that do not comfortably fit into the prevailing culture must be accompanied by extensive support and encouragement for changes in behaviour. After some initial difficulties, the OQN is now operating constructively.

Conclusion

Oman is a small higher education sector, but through its policy of importing programmes from various countries, as well as developing its own, it serves as an interesting microcosm of the challenges being played out in the broader international higher education community.

A comprehensive national quality management system for higher education involves a number of distinct but interrelated frameworks and processes, in much the same way that the human body requires the distinct but interrelated skeletal, muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular and digestive systems all working together. Until such time as all the essential elements are in place, the maintenance of quality education is heavily dependent upon ad hoc methods of human intervention and the limitations that come with them. As Oman's system evolves, individual elements need to be reviewed and recalibrated to align with the various iterations of the system as a whole. Each element needs to make sense on its own, but also as part of the whole.

A key to success is the tandem strategy of benchmarking plus the involvement of many stakeholders through a range of consultative methods before, during and after the development and approval of the various system elements. Consultation beforehand helps identify and gain common agreement on the sector's needs. Consultation during development helps gain the sector's confidence in the proposed solutions; expands the pool of knowledge contributing to the solution; and helps set the ground work for post-approval implementation. Consultation after approval helps disseminate and explain final decisions, thereby leading to speedy implementation. Ultimately, "the involvement of the sector strengthens the legitimacy of the system" (Razvi & Carroll, 2007, p. 12).

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