The Case for National Program Accreditation in The Sultanate of Oman

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ABSTRACT

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority is developing a national system of program accreditation applicable to all higher education programs in Oman. This paper explores the rationale for the development of this system. Globally, there is an increasing number of accreditation bodies working internationally which provide opportunities for HEIs to accredit their programs. A number of HEIs in Oman either have or are in the process of seeking program accreditation from such bodies; while this is something the OAAA encourages, it does not consider external program accreditation a replacement for national accreditation. Examination of different international program accreditation systems illustrates how these vary in their scope, apply standards which vary in detail, use different assessment processes, and deliver outcomes that are different in meaning. Different systems vary too in their rigour and transparency. This complex accreditation landscape is also impacted by the growth of 'accreditation mills' which award accreditation without requiring appropriate standards to be met. Accreditation of different programs across the country by different organisations therefore does not create a 'level playing field'. Without this, it is difficult for students, employers and the wider public, to form a clear view about the merits of a program, or to make meaningful comparisons. Also, for the government, it is difficult to form a clear overview of the quality of higher education programs being offered in the country. This paper argues that a robust *national* system of accreditation is required to address these issues. Oman's national program accreditation system is set to establish nation-wide, generic program standards which are internationally benchmarked but also address local needs. There will be consistency in the program accreditation process which will provide a national oversight of the quality of programs being offered and a helpful comparison of programs by stakeholders. The paper concludes that a national system of program accreditation is critical to the development of the Omani higher education sector while recognising that bona fide non-Omani external program accreditation is complementary to this and is to be encouraged.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The context for this paper is the development by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) of a national system of institutional and program accreditation. The Royal Decree 54/2010, which established the OAAA, called for the OAAA to establish a system consisting of a number of components, including the establishment and update of the standards and process for program accreditation, accrediting programs against relevant standards, and collaborating with the Ministry of Higher Education regarding the development and update of the process of program accreditation. Oman's national program accreditation system will establish generic program standards which are internationally benchmarked, but which also address Omani national initiatives, protocols, guidelines and strategies.

The objectives of the paper are to set out the rationale for the development of a national system of program accreditation in Oman, and to demonstrate how a robust national system of accreditation can address the needs of the nation, as well as the needs of range of stakeholders.

2. WHAT IS MEANT BY PROGRAM ACCREDITATION?

This paper focuses on 'accreditation' primarily in relation to academic programs. It is therefore important to be clear about what is meant by this term. Like other terms used in the field of quality assurance, 'accreditation' has no universally accepted definition (Harvey, 2004). One of the challenges in discussing accreditation is that the terminology used means different things in different countries and different educational contexts (Vebra and Scheuthe, 2012). For example, in Australia, degree-awarding HEIs are described as 'self-accrediting' institutions and their *internal* approval of their own programs is termed accreditation. However, in the UK similar processes are termed program 'validation' or 'approval' and the term accreditation is not used. In the USA, as in the UK, accreditation is a term used for some form of *external* quality review of academic provision (Eaton, 2012).

The OAAA also bases its use of the term accreditation on the evaluation of higher education provision by an external body (OAAA, 2014). In Oman, approval from the Ministry of Higher Education for a private HEI to run a new program is formally termed "licensing"; the term accreditation is not used in relation to this process. However, the similar process in Saudi Arabia

includes 'provisional accreditation' by the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment.

Oman's higher education landscape is characterised by a diversity of higher education provision. This is shaped by the wide range of overseas HEIs which have academic affiliations with Omani HEIs; in 2012, HEIs from at least ten different countries had academic affiliation agreements with Omani HEIs, many specifically in relation to the provision and quality assurance of academic programs (Trevor-Roper et al, 2013). This diversity inevitably introduces different uses of terminology associated with academic quality assurance into the Omani HE sector, and increases the importance of a nationally shared understanding of terminology. Although higher education provision in Oman principally operates in English, there is some Arabic provision and the discourse of higher education takes place in both languages. Challenges in the translation of key terms associated with academic quality assurance also impact on the potential for a lack of shared understanding of terms.

To support the development of this paper, the OAAA undertook a brief survey of HEIs in Oman on the accreditation status of their academic programs as well as of their institution. The response obtained indicated a lack of shared understanding of the term 'accreditation' in the sector. For example, one HEI in the sector operating UK higher education programs (i.e. programs for which the awards are conferred by an UK affiliate) stated that its programs were not accredited by external bodies while another HEI also operating UK higher education programs stated that its programs were accredited – citing the UK affiliate as the accrediting body. The feedback also indicated a lack of shared understanding of the status of an institution which has undergone OAAA Quality Audit. OAAA Quality Audit is the first stage of the OAAA's two-stage institutional accreditation process and all the HEIs in the survey have undergone this process (although none has yet undergone the second stage, Institutional Standards Assessment, which will result in an accreditation decision). Most institutions reported that they were not accredited by an external accreditation body, but one HEI reported that it was accredited by the OAAA. The authors of this paper acknowledge that the intention in this case may have been to indicate that this HEI was *to be subject to* accreditation by the OAAA. Nevertheless, it appears important to clarify that while the OAAA is the national accrediting body for HEIs and academic programs in Oman, not all its external review activities lead to accreditation. Another example of a lack of shared understanding relates to the OAAA's setting of national academic standards for General Foundation Programs (GFPs). While all GFPs in Oman have adopted these standards, to date the OAAA has conducted no GFP Standards Assessment. However, one HEI indicated that its GFP was accredited by the OAAA.

In summary, the OAAA does not use the term accreditation in relation to the approval of an HEI to be established or for the initial approval of a program to run; these processes are referred to as 'licensing' and are typically undertaken by the relevant supervising ministry. The term accreditation is also not used to refer to any internal process that is undertaken by an HEI or its affiliate. 'Accreditation' is used to refer to formal program or institutional review processes which are undertaken by a bona fide body *external to the HEI,* against defined standards, and which result in a formal decision which recognises that these standards have been met. This definition concurs with the characteristics of 'accreditation' as identified by a number of other higher education accrediting bodies: the verification or approval of a program; by an authorized external organisation; and formal recognition that a program meets minimum required standards or benchmark criteria (BAC; CAA; EKKA; MQA; NCAAA). The only bona fide body in Oman which can accredit higher education programs and institutions is the OAAA (as set out in Royal Decree 54/2010); in each case, accreditation will mean that the OAAA has judged that the program or institution has met the relevant OAAA standards. Formal accreditation will be granted for a given period of time and this will be publicised on the OAAA website. In addition, programs and institutions may seek and be granted accreditation by international accreditation bodies, though caution is required to ensure that any international bodies undertaking accreditation activities in Oman are recognised as being legitimate (see the discussion below on 'accreditation mills'). The OAAA is recognised as a bona fide accreditation body through its status as a government body and its membership of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Table 1 summaries in general terms what the OAAA does and does not mean by the term 'accreditation'.

Table 1: What the OAAA does and does not mean by the term "accreditation".

Accreditation	
What it means	*What it does not mean*
• Judgement by a bona fide national or international body with a formal remit to undertake institutional / program accreditation which determines through a formal process that a defined set of standards has been met. The accreditation body is *external* to and independent from the institution/program. Accredited status is conferred by this body for a defined period of time.	• Approval by a supervising ministry in Oman for an institution to be established or for a program to run. This is termed *licensing.*
	• Approval by a degree-awarding HEI in Oman that a new program can run. *(Degree awarding power is conferred through the formal classification of an HEI in accordance with the Oman Institutional Classification Framework).*
	• Approval by an international affiliate that one of its programs can be delivered at an Omani HEI. This may be termed a *franchise* arrangement.
	• Approval by an international affiliate that it will be the awarding body for a program run by an Omani HEI. This may be termed a *validation* arrangement.
	• Undergoing OAAA Quality Audit. Quality Audit is the first stage of institutional accreditation; this does not result in an accreditation outcome.
	• That an HEI is implementing a recognised set of standards. For example, national academic standards have been set for GFPs but to date no OAAA assessment of GFPs against these standards has taken place.

3. PROGRAM ACCCREDITATION AND REVIEW IN THE GCC

Oman and the OAAA is not alone in the region in seeking to establish a national system of program accreditation. A survey of the GCC states confirms that most operate a system of national program accreditation, alongside that of institutional accreditation. Examination of the official literature of the national quality assurance bodies in the GCC highlights some common challenges facing these countries' higher education systems, and the development of *national* quality assurance and accreditation systems represents a solution to meeting those challenges; many of these challenges may also be applicable to Oman:

- The need to respond to the relatively rapid growth in private HEIs (NBAQ, 2014).

- The need to demonstrate minimum acceptable (international) standards on quality in all institutions and to promote high quality provision, and continuous quality improvement (CAA, 2011; NBAQ, 2014; NCAAA, 2013; QQA, 2014).

- The need to publicly recognise programs that meet required quality standards, and to confirm the credibility of those programs and institutions, and to keep the public informed on the quality and accreditation status of HEIs and their programs (NBAQ, 2014; NCAAA, 2013).

- Give confidence to a range of stakeholders (students, prospective students, families, employers, and other members of the community, and other interested parties) that institutions and programs meet standards consistent with current international academic and professional practices (CAA, 2011; NCAAA, 2013; QQA, 2014).

- Ensuring that the higher education sector makes an effective contribution to building a knowledge-based economy and responding to changing global human capital requirements; related to this, giving stakeholders confidence that graduates have the right skills and knowledge to participate in national and international marketplaces (CAA, 2011; QQA, 2014).

- Helping to promote recognition of, and respect for, national qualifications across borders, to support student mobility between institutions and nations, in the context of the globalization of higher education (CAA, 2011; NCAAA, 2013).

4. PROGRAM ACCREDITATION IN OMAN – THE CURRENT HE LANDSCAPE

For the purposes of this paper, OAAA undertook a brief survey of all Omani HEIs, asking them to identify if any of their programs were accredited by external accreditation bodies, and if so, by

which. This simple survey did not seek to be comprehensive or exhaustive, and the responses my not be representative of the sector as a whole. Nevertheless, the data gathered presents an interesting insight into the current program accreditation landscape, and the findings suggest some of the opportunities and limitations that landscape presents. Please note that, for the remainder of this section of the paper, generalised references to 'HEIs' refer to the sample of HEIs who responded to the survey, and not to all the institutions in Oman's HE sector.

Twenty-nine HEIs responded to the survey, representing approximately 46% of all HEIs in the sector. Of those 29 HEIs, some 11 indicated that one or more of their programs were externally accredited. In these HEIs, a range of program accreditation models and different forms of accreditation are represented.

In the case of Oman's sole public university, the University is engaged with over 10 different external accreditation bodies (as defined by the institution), with plans in place to further extend this engagement. This comprehensive approach reflects the University's strategic intention to secure external accreditation across its five Colleges and their associated programs. Additionally, there are six HEIs among the respondents where external program accreditation is secured through their relationships with their affiliate partners, and where the partner University validated the program and is the degree-awarding body (it is the affiliate University which has secured external accreditation for its program). Two of the respondent HEIs have successfully sought external program accreditation through overseas national accreditation bodies (for example, Germany; India). Finally, one HEI reported that a number of its individual modules/courses had been externally accredited (as opposed to a complete program); and one HEI reported that accreditation took the form of achievement of ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) proprietory, industrial and commercial standards. In addition to existing program accreditation, a small number of HEIs also signalled their intention to seek program accreditation in the future, in doing so identifying potential accreditation bodies.

Table 2 lists those external accreditation bodies, as identified by the HEIs, which currently have links with program delivered in Oman; it also includes details of prospective accreditation bodies, as identified by the HEIs.

Table 2: Organisations identified by HEIs as External Program Accreditation Bodies, Grouped by Profession and/or Academic Field (*those italicised denote the future intentions of HEIs who responded to the survey*)

Profession/Academic Field	Accrediting Body *(*)*
Accountancy	Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS) *Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)* *Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW)* *Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (ACCA)*
Business and Management	Association of MBSs (AMBA) *Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)* EQUIS/European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD)
Education	*National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)* National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACFTL)-SPA International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)- SPA National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)-SPA National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)- SPA
Engineering	Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology, Engineering Accreditation Commission (ABET/ AEC)
Information Technology/Computing	British Computer Society (BCS)
National Accrediting Bodies	Accreditation, Certification, and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN, Germany) National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, India)
Other Academic Fields	Canadian Society for Chemistry (CSC) The Geological Society, London (GSL) *American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE)* United Nations World Tourism Organisation (TedQual-UNWTO) *Institute of Hospitality*
Other	The Institution of Occupational Safety and

	Health (IOSH) The National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH) International Maritime Organisation and STCW Code (International Convention for Standards, Training Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers) Various USA accreditation agencies (unspecified; via MST-USA)

(*) Status as 'accrediting' bodies as defined by the respondent HEIs.

Table 2 illustrates the current (and potential) diversity of the external program accreditation landscape in Oman. Looking across the range of professions and academic disciplines represented, there are some 28 different bodies. These bodies provide important external verification for the Omani HEIs concerned on the appropriateness and quality of the programs they deliver. In doing so, external program accreditation plays an important role in providing independent assurance to students and other stakeholders on the good standing of their program of study and the qualification that program leads to.

The complexity of the program accreditation landscape can be highlighted by examining in more detail some aspects of the program accreditation methodologies employed by the bodies identified in Table 2. As Vebra and Scheuthe (2012) note, while different accreditation systems may use similar criteria and procedures, differences lie in the interpretation of criteria and the implementation of the procedures. There exists significant diversity in the scope and detail of the accreditation exercises undertaken by these bodies, professional areas or academic fields notwithstanding. In some cases, these are expressed as standards and criteria; in others as areas; and in some others still, as 'performance targets'. There is also significant diversity in the range and depth of accreditation scopes, from the highly specified, to the more generalised. Some bodies accredit programs and/or clusters of programs, while others may accredit a school or college within an HEI. Also, some bodies may accredit newly offered programs, while others require at least one cohort of students to have graduated before the program is eligible for accreditation assessment. Different accreditation bodies also use different assessment processes. Almost all appear to ask for the HEI to submit a form of self-evaluation, and most employ a site visit. However, again, there is considerable variation in the nature of the scrutiny, and the expectations placed on the HEI; for example, some assessment processes are primarily based on documentation only; and the timescales of the assessment exercises range from relatively brief time periods to up to 5 years. It is also interesting to note that at least one of the accreditation bodies requires the HEI to be of good standing and to hold national accreditation as a pre-requisite for successfully achieving accreditation by that accreditation body. Finally, there is significant variation in the outcomes of

those accreditation processes. Many use summative outcomes such as 'accredited', 'deferred' or 'denied', though the accreditation period can range from 1 to 10 years between different accreditation bodies, and depending on the performance of the HEI/program. Some require the HEI to produce action plans and/or undertake their own follow-up visits, while some do not. Some bodies (particularly in accountancy it would seem) do not refer to the outcome as 'accreditation', but to the HEI/program achieving 'partner in learning' status (of different levels or grades). Many of the accreditation bodies make public a list of accredited institutions/programs through the use of an on-line register on their websites. Of the sample studied, none made public the accreditation report, and/or the more detailed outcomes of that exercise.

To illustrate in a little more detail the diversity discussed above, there is benefit in looking at two professional/academic field groupings: Engineering and Accountancy.

As Table 2 shows, in the case of Engineering, HEIs are currently working with two accreditation bodies: IET and ABET. In a number of respects, the approach to accreditation of these bodies is broadly similar, in that the scope of their processes, while differently organised, covers the same broad areas (for example, program education objectives; curriculum content; staffing; resources; facilities). In relation to accreditation outcomes, IET accredits for 1, 3 or 5 years, while ABET accredits for 2 or 6 years. Both, however, can formally identify program deficiencies in their processes and require some form of follow-up activity. Therefore, in a number of respects, there are strong commonalities between the two approaches.

In the case of Accountancy, neither CIMA, ICAEW nor ACCA use 'standards' per se; CIMA refer to five areas or 'steps to success' (also termed 'indicative performance requirements'), information on which is published on the CIMA website. ACCA employ 'performance targets' (also described as 'global best practice benchmarks'), but these are not publically available on the ACCA website. While ICAEW does not include a site visit as part of its accreditation process, CIMA does (though the length and rigour of this is unspecified). In the case of ACCA, their website did not include easily accessible information about the assessment process. In all three instances, accreditation leads to 'Partner in Learning' status and, in the case of CIMA, accreditation can be renewed annually for a relatively modest fee.

The above analysis does not seek to detract from the good standing of these accreditation bodies, or that they are internationally respected for their role in maintaining sound education standards and high quality in their professional areas. Rather, this analysis seeks to demonstrate that, across

Oman's HE sector, external program accreditation activity is, overall, a complex, diverse and complicated set of frameworks, expectations, processes and outcomes. This makes it challenging to compare 'like with like' within professional disciplines and/or academic fields, and problematic to make comparisons across disciplines and fields. The implications of this for stakeholders having a clear oversight of quality and standards will be returned to later in this paper.

And, what about the HEIs in Oman without external program accreditation? The survey also indicated that there are some 19 HEIs where currently there is no external program accreditation. These HEIs reflect the diversity of the sector – covering both public and private institutions, and universities, university colleges, colleges and other institutes. The OAAA survey did not seek to ascertain from these HEIs why they have not sought program accreditation, but here are a number of possible scenarios: the HEIs have yet to identify the benefits of external program accreditation; that, to date, they do not consider their programs to be sufficiently established to undergo accreditation; or that they have not been able to identify an appropriate accreditation body to work with. In these cases, a system of national program accreditation can play an important role in meeting the needs of these institutions, and this point will be returned to later in the paper.

5. THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

It has been noted that, globally, there is an increasing number of schemes for accrediting higher education institutions and programs and that, across Europe, accreditation (both public and private schemes) has become the dominant form of quality assurance (Stensaker and Harvey, 2006). A growing emphasis on accreditation schemes is seen to reflect a number of developments in higher education, including the emergence of new HEIs, and the growing internationalisation of the higher education sector.

There are also different types of accreditation bodies (for example, agencies, councils, commissions), which may focus on general accreditation, specialised accreditation, professional accreditation, regional accreditation, national accreditation, or distance education accreditation (Vlasceanu et al, 2007). The prevalence of accreditation bodies, while representing choice for HEIs seeking accreditation of their institution or programs, creates a very complex accreditation landscape. Accreditation bodies will vary in their scope, apply standards which vary in their detail, use different assessment processes, and deliver outcomes that are different in their meaning.

For the prospective or current student, employers and the wider public, this makes it difficult to form a clear view of the merits of an institution or program, and to make helpful comparisons. For other stakeholders, such as government or ministries, it is difficult to form a clear overview of the quality of the higher education sector.

Additionally, the growth in accreditation bodies is also seen to include both public and private accreditation schemes (Stensaker and Harvey, 2006). A notable distinction between the public and private accreditation schemes concerns access to information about both the accreditation process and its outcomes. Public schemes tend to be more open. Private schemes tend to strictly limit public insight about what has led to a particular accreditation decision. For example, in the USA, a long tradition of confidentiality stems from the focus of accreditation on the institution, and helping it to improve, rather than the provision of public information (Manning, 2012).

It is also recognised that some accreditation bodies are more rigorous than others. For example, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; USA) has a recognition process for accrediting bodies. Recognition by CHEA affirms that the standards and processes of the accrediting organisation are consistent with the academic quality, improvement and accountability expectations that CHEA has established (CHEA, 2014). A national system of program accreditation also protects HEIs (and correspondingly, current and prospective students) from the downfalls of 'accreditation mills', which are bogus accrediting agencies that award accreditation to HEIs or programs, without requiring the HEI to meet appropriate quality standards. Thus, the accreditation has no legal or academic value and, therefore, nor does the HEI's awards (Harvey, 2004-13).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, a national system of program accreditation for Oman can address many of the issues raised in the previous sections of this paper:

    i.   It establishes nation-wide program standards, while clearly identifying that responsibility for meeting these standards lies with the institution. A national system of program accreditation can consider national requirements, and this is important in ensuring that the Oman higher education sector contributes to the achievement of national priorities. The OAAA's development of generic program standards recognises the ultimate responsibility of HEIs for the academic standards of their awards and quality of their programs; generic program standards enable HEIs to identify and

implement benchmark discipline-specific and/or professional requirements, and also recognise the role of external professional accrediting bodies in the sector.

ii. It facilitates international recognition of Omani programs and awards, thereby promoting international student mobility as well as graduate employability.

iii. It helps promote alignment between program licensing and program accreditation processes, by making these processes transparent.

iv. It meets the needs of HEIs for their programmes to be accredited, where there is no immediately apparent external accreditation body (for example, academic programmes that are more academic in their emphasis, as opposed to having a professional emphasis). As suggested by the OAAA survey, there are a significant number of such HEIs and programs. A system of national program accreditation, delivered through a bona fide accreditation body also helps protect HEIs from the pitfalls of 'accreditation mills'.

v. It enhances an HEI's 'brand', and helps in the promotion of the HEI and its programmes.

vi. It enables the national oversight of quality assurance and improvement systems in HEIs, ensuring that these are in place and effective, and that the outcomes of these systems meet national standards.

vii. It ensures consistency in program accreditation processes across Oman (in program standards, accreditation methodology; outcomes), so enabling meaningful comparison of programs.

viii. It facilitates transparency in both the accreditation process and its outcomes, and enables stakeholders to reach informed views about HEIs and their programs, and to make informed decisions. This will help potential students in the selection of their programs of study. It is OAAA's intention that accreditation outcomes will be published on the OAAA website. This public reporting will include both the status of the program (for example, licensed; on probation; accredited; accredited with merit), and also the ratings against each standard and criterion for each program. While this proposal is still under development, the thinking is that stakeholders will be able to use a database to compare the performance of different programs within and between HEIs, and also to potentially focus on standards and criteria which reflect their own priorities (for example, graduate employability; research activity; academic support for

students). OAAA's intended approach therefore promotes transparency and the dissemination of information to stakeholders, while avoiding the pitfalls of 'league tables'.

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