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**THE SYSTEM OF QUALITY
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EDUCATION: THE CASE STUDY OF THE
SULTANATE OF OMAN**

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The System of Quality Network/Assurance in Higher Education: The Case Study of the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract – Higher education sector in Oman has grown and made significant development in the last decade. There is heavy investment to improve the education infrastructure, provide increased education opportunities with focus on women education to ensure equality and equity. The spread of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of all types, diversified programmes and establishment of Quality Assurance Council is a testimony to the importance given by the nation to ensure quality of higher education that the needs/requirements of 21st century are met. In order to achieve an international standard in higher education, all HEIs have adopted - imported curriculum, recruited international / expatriate faculty and English as a medium of instruction. Despite these efforts, the quality of education in term of 21st century, requirement both in terms of knowledge acquisition and skills seems to be missing and is not up to the desired level.

This paper will discuss the role of quality assurance units in Higher Education Institutes. The discussion will include an introduction on the need for Quality Assurance units followed by challenges facing quality assurance units.

The paper then describes the outcomes of an initial needs analysis that led to the development of a National Quality Plan. Some of the strategies in this plan for improving and increasing capability are considered, most particularly the establishment of a practitioner-oriented Oman Quality Network, and the design and implementation of a National Quality Training Program. These two strategies attempt to address common obstacles to capability, namely a paradigm that entrenches compliance and helplessness, and only early awareness of effective quality enhancement and quality assurance principles and methods.

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INTRODUCTION

As an emerging economy with a growing population, Oman has been facing a significant challenge to ensure that the demands for a skilled and educated workforce are being met. This has put the emerging higher education sector under pressure to expand rapidly and to produce quality graduates. The higher education opportunities provided by the public institutions, including those provided by the only comprehensive national institution, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Established in 1986 were insufficient. In response to these demands, the Omani government issued the private higher education law and the first private college was established in the mid-1990s. Since then, the number of HEIs has been expanding and there are now over sixty public and private institutions offering a post-secondary qualification (as per the Oman Qualifications Framework). The government also recognized the

need to monitor the quality of these HEIs and their programs. Consequently, the OAC was established in 2001 as an external quality assurance agency to assure the public that Omani HEIs and higher education programs meet international standards. The OAC developed and implemented a national quality assurance system in 2003/2004. This system was internationally benchmarked and went through a comprehensive review. Currently, and in line with international good practice, the system is being revised to ensure its sustainability and improve its relevance to Oman. This is in line with Ryan's (1993) view that countries must individualize the quality assurance system they adopt so that it becomes compatible with cultural and national factors while upholding international quality standards. This paper will provide an overview of the development of Oman's external quality assurance system and consider the impact of implementing Quality Audits as

the first stage of the institutional accreditation process.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expanding very fast in Arab countries due to increase in social demand for education and priority of the governments to produce efficient and effective human resources according to the requirements of their economies. The financial and administrative capacity of these countries to respond this growing demand has been well debated in the literature. To improve the quality of higher education, various approaches have been adopted. The shifting of education to private sector to overcome the growing demand and improve quality is one the approach used in most of the Arab countries. Various types of accreditation institutions have been developed to check the quality. Despite of continuous efforts for improving higher education, there is still widespread criticism about the quality of higher education in GCC countries (Shah and Baporikar, 2010).

Quality Assurance has been regarded as one of the basic instruments for the instigation of standards in Higher Education Institutions. However, the process that has been carried out were not embedded within a formal quality assurance system, but were part of everyday life without clearly defined procedures and indicators. The primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher lies within each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability and the academic system within the national quality framework.

The increase of institutional autonomy of HEIs means an increase in the responsibility of the institution and its members especially when it comes to enforcing the standards, which in turn guarantees the quality and results required. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to plan and implement procedure which would guarantee that each higher education institution builds a sustainable system of quality assurance. Autonomy is a precondition for promoting internal quality.

A role is defined as "a set of systematically interrelated and observable behaviors that belong to an identifiable job or position". Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the role of quality assurance units in Higher Education Institutions. The following discussion will include the need for quality assurance units; challenges of managing quality assurance units; a case study of the role of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit at the Scientific College of Design.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The educational history of the Sultanate of Oman has undergone rapid development. In 1970, there were three primary schools in the country with less than 1000 students and no college or university (Al Bandary, 2005 and Al Shmeli, 2009). Today, there are more than 62 higher education institutions run by private and public sector offering various programmes. The total number of students in Higher Education in

Oman in 2009 is approximately 80,000 (Al Shmeli, 2009). Higher Education Institutions are owned and governed by a variety of entities, including the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Man Power, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, other governmental entities, and private owners (OAC, 2006).

Oman is a developing country with a population of around 2.5 million (including 666,000 expatriates). It has a youthful population with, as at July 2006, a birthrate of 24.75 per 1000 and growing (although this is offset by a high infant mortality rate of 10.2). Nearly half the population is children or teenagers. Until 1970, the country's economic and social development was stagnant.

The discovery of oil in 1962 meant the advent of economically viable export industry. The first exports took place in 1967. In a very short period of time, Oman's future changed from continuance as a village-based, agricultural and aquaculture country, to potential as a major exporter of a high value commodity. This, in turn, spurred the demand for a more highly educated society. However, international interaction at that time was very low (with the exception of the collaborative oil drilling venture), and intra-national tribal disputes were commonplace.

Among many interests of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said education were developing greater links with the international community (Oman became a member of the United Nations in 1971) and improving the education of Omani nationals. Prior to 1970 there had been no formal higher education. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the development of government-run colleges, primarily offering vocational (up to certificate level) and technical (up to undergraduate diploma level) programs. These mainly focused on the national priorities of health and teaching. The colleges continue today, and the offerings have expanded to include computer and information technology and business courses, as well as a small number of other subjects.

A major development occurred in 1986 with the inauguration of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), a comprehensive university located just outside the capitol region of Muscat. Today, SQU is the major higher education institution in Oman with over 10,000 students and seven Colleges (Agriculture, Arts, Commerce and Economics, Education, Engineering, Medicine, Science). It offers programs up to masters level, and is looking to offer doctoral programs in the near future. Nonetheless, SQU on its own could not accommodate the growing demand for higher education places.

In the mid-1990s, a major strategic shift was implemented. Mindful that it did not have the capacity or capability to develop and deliver sufficient higher education opportunities to meet the needs of a

youthful and growing population, Oman started importing higher education in earnest. The principal delivery mechanism was to establish privately owned local colleges and universities, offering imported diploma and degree programs from credible higher education providers in such countries as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.

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. This has made any national strategizing extremely difficult.

Oman is now entering into a new phase: the establishment of a comprehensive system of quality assurance and quality enhancement. This is an attempt, through improved quality management, to consolidate significant gains in sectorial growth. Oman's higher education sector now has 22 private providers of higher education programs (including three private universities); over two dozen public colleges (of various forms) and the public SQU. In Omani parlance they are all described as higher education (the authors recognize that this does not stand up to most international definitions).

THE OMAN QUALITY NETWORK

One specific objective in the draft National Quality Plan is "to establish an Oman Quality Network to facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas and effective practices." The MoHE notes in its Strategic Plan for Education that "the level of cooperation [between private HEPs] is very limited". This has been reinforced during the aforementioned visits by OAC staff to HEPs. The Strategic Plan includes as an Action that HEPs "are encouraged to share resources and strategies in the development of quality and also to develop effective systems of articulation". This can be addressed through establishing an Oman Quality Network. This strategy has been used to tremendous and sustainable effect, albeit in a slightly different form, in New Zealand (through annual Quality Enhancement Meetings) and Australia (through the annual Australian Universities Quality Forum and annual Auditor Meetings of the Australian Universities Quality Agency – given that the auditors are primarily senior representatives from the sector).

Possible roles for a quality network include (and are not limited to) the following:

Mission -

(a) The Oman Quality Network (OQN) is a collegial and independent, not-for-profit

network of Omani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focused on quality enhancement in higher education.

- (b) It is concerned with developing a strong and vibrant higher education sector by improving quality in higher education within the Sultanate of Oman.
- (c) It aims to build a quality-conscious and knowledge-rich higher education sector through the sharing of ideas, strategies, research, and practices that ensures the pursuit of quality enhancement.

Statements of Purpose -

- (a) To raise the capability and professional skills of the sector in quality enhancement and quality assurance.
- (b) To share good practices, strategies, research and development in relation to the assurance and enhancement of quality in higher education.
- (c) To provide feedback to the MoHE, the OAC and other agencies, as appropriate, on standards, policies and processes for the higher education sector proposed by stakeholders.
- (d) To conduct regular meetings for the purposes of discussing priority topics.
- (e) To identify and prioritize professional development training needs for the sector.
- (f) To commission the development and provision of training modules on topics related to quality assurance and quality enhancement.
- (g) To conduct regular forums, seminars or workshops and a biennial conference.
- (h) To establish and participate regularly in online communications and discussions on issues of quality assurance and enhancement.
- (i) To establish working parties on various priority topics as the need arises.
- (j) To establish a database of Member details and expertise for the purpose of sharing capability across the sector.
- (k) To encourage Members to document their good practice, and experiences about

successes, failures and lessons learned through systemic inquiry and reflection.

- (l) To conduct or commission research into quality enhancement and improvement on priority topics.
- (m) To publish a regular newsletter with contributions from the whole higher education sector.

Principles -

- (a) All Members have a desire to advance the quality of higher education in Oman.
- (b) The OQN is a network of and for the whole higher education sector, including private and public institutions. It is not an instrument of the Government or a mechanism for conducting campaigns outside of the quality agenda by the HEIs.
- (c) The OQN is a network of equal peers. All leadership roles in the network will be shared.
- (d) The OQN will share, in good faith, information about successes, failures and lessons learned in quality assurance.
- (e) All materials and information shared will be referenced to their source in the expected manner.
- (f) Nothing shared in the OQN will be used in a manner detrimental to any OQN member.
- (g) Although HEIs may compete on a number of levels, the OQN recognizes that the sector can achieve things together that it could not achieve individually.

The Oman Quality Network was officially launched in September 2006 with Her Excellency, Dr Rawya Al Busaidiya, and Minister of Higher Education as Patron. This occurred after many months of negotiating for a non-hierarchical and informal network via a hierarchical bureaucracy that is used to dealing with official business through formal channels. The engagement of a Minister as Patron proved to be invaluable in eliminating some aspects of resistance, and the delivery by the Minister of an address espousing the benefits of an informal network eliminated yet others.

At the time of writing, the Oman Quality Network has 'elected' an Executive Committee and lists nearly 90 members nominated from all HEPs in the Sultanate of Oman, including SQU. The network's charter is in a final draft with only the matter of membership fees still outstanding. The financial operations of the Oman Quality Network have proven to be difficult due to its informal status, however the Director General of

Finance within the Ministry of Higher Education persuaded a manager of a leading Omani bank to open an account in the name of the Oman Quality Network whilst the Executive pursues formal registration as a non-profit organization (this may take some time). The Oman Quality Network has a draft budget which includes the delivery of the Training Program (mentioned in the next session) in 2007 including the ability to invite three international experts to prepare and provide modules. A meeting set to occur in late 2007 will formulate the program of topics for the Training Program in 2007, and will also discuss the possibility of conducting a national forum on quality higher education, including calls for papers and participation from scholars, practitioners, policy and decision makers from outside of the membership of the Oman Quality Network. Progress to date bodes well for the sustainability of the Oman Quality Network and the Training Program in 2007 at the very least.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The most significant event in capacity-building for quality assurance in the Sultanate was the institution of an accreditation mechanism in the year 2001. It was then that the Oman Accreditation Board was established by Royal Decree as an independent body reporting to the Council of Higher Education.

The Accreditation Board is now incorporated in an entity consisting of a governing board and an operational staff or secretariat. Together, the Board and Secretariat are called the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC). The Board consists of ten members appointed from among senior academic staff in the higher education system and from among high level professionals in the private and government sectors.

The Board is charged with assisting in the development of the country's higher education sector through institutional accreditation (which includes quality audit) as well as through the program accreditation processes. In collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), the Board also has responsibilities for establishing academic standards, and providing training and networking opportunities.

The OAC and the Ministry of Higher Education worked with international experts and representatives from Oman's higher education institutions to establish essential components of a national quality framework. The components included a classification system for different types of Higher Education Institutions; a set of institutional standards; a national qualifications framework and processes for accrediting institutions and programs.

This work was the first stage in the development of a comprehensive plan for a Higher Education Quality Management System (The Quality Plan) in full consultation with the higher education sector. A draft of the plan can be found on the OAC website -

www.oac.gov.om. The Quality Plan has been completed and quality audits have commenced. The process of building a comprehensive set of academic standards for all higher education programs is ongoing.

The OAC has also delivered training sessions to the higher education sector throughout the country as part of the Oman Quality Training Program, an initiative developed in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education. The training modules have covered over 15 integrated training topics related to quality assurance and enhancement in higher education, including Preparing a Self-Study Portfolio, Key Performance Indicators, Risk Management, and Quality Audit. On a train-the-trainer model, participants were given materials and tools to enable them to share workshop content with colleagues in their institutions.

Involvement and collaboration were cornerstones in the formation of the Oman Quality Network (OQN), a national network of Higher Education Institutions, the Ministry of Higher Education and OAC representatives. The OQN is concerned with developing a strong and vibrant higher education sector by improving quality in Higher Education throughout the system. It aims to build a quality-conscious, knowledge-rich higher education sector through the sharing of ideas, strategies, research, and practices which nourish quality improvement. All parties will work together to continue to build on their collective strengths for the benefit of the higher education sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Oman Accreditation Council has a grand vision and far reaching goals. The task is not merely to get Omani graduates into work locally – but to give them the skills to make them global players. In the words of the consulting Director of the OAC, “We need to give employers confidence in higher education in order to meet Romanization plans. In the Global Era Omani graduates should be equipped for international mobility. This means, amongst other things, that our standards must ultimately align with international standards.”

CONCLUSION

Quality assurance within the network has been formalized but in such a way that it is fully integrated in the functioning and learning of the network. Members of the network feel ownership of the QA standards, documents and processes and have the ability to change them and develop them. However, this process requires respect, trust and sharing tasks among the different partners.

Quality assurance is a requirement of Higher Education which directs small institutions such as the Scientific College of Design to maturity and further

development of quality education. The role of the Quality Assurance & Enhancement Unit expanded with the growth of the institution. The significance of SCD experience was in the fact the unit was comprised of faculty members who had been working at the institution. **The firm belief of the administration that its faculty members had the potential to be better "Quality Managers" than external experts.** Institution leadership must be aware of this challenge and offer full support to the Quality Assurance Units. Research should focus on measurement of managing quality assurance units. **In addition, the effectiveness of quality assurance units in higher education institutions.**

The Oman Quality Network provides, for the first time in Oman, a mechanism by which the HEP and Government can share leadership responsibilities for issues **related to quality higher education.**

Within the past two and a half decades, the Sultanate of Oman has developed an independent system of Higher Education consisting of over sixty HEIs. All qualified secondary school graduates, regardless of the socio-economic circumstances of their families can find places in a plethora of universities and colleges offering a broad range of programs through a centralized, fair and transparent system of admission and scholarship allocation.

Increasingly, mature students are taking advantage of opportunities to upgrade their skills and engage in life-long learning through both core and continuing education courses. Adults are offered the opportunity to complete the GSC in secondary schools as well as to take courses to improve their literacy. It is fair to say that the Sultanate offers universal access to all academically qualified applicants regardless of their means.

The Sultanate has taken advantage of opportunities available in the global era by utilizing international expertise without compromising Omani identity, integrity and independence or the traditional values in which the culture is rooted. With the exception of the Arab Open University, all private HEIs operating in the Sultanate are dominantly Omani-owned and Omani-governed.

It is concluded that all the internal factors including Basic Foundation Programme teaching methodology, curricula, faculty and infrastructures have been developed fairly good in HEIs in Oman and appropriate to contribute in the acquisition of knowledge and skill of the students.

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