This is the first draft of the Conceptual Design Framework for Stage 2 of the Institutional Accreditation process: Standards Assessment. This draft is being circulated along with the draft standards for two areas: Governance and Management and Student Learning by Coursework to an international panel of experts, HEI representatives (through the Consultative Committee) and other external stakeholders in Oman. To guide those providing feedback, the following questions may be helpful:

**Conceptual Design Framework**

a) Are the *Fundamental Principles* outlined in the draft Conceptual Design Framework sound and clearly expressed?

b) Does the draft Conceptual Design Framework clearly articulate how the draft standards have been developed and what OAAA institutional accreditation means?

**Institutional Standards**

a) Do the draft standards reflect the *Fundamental Principles* outlined in the Conceptual Design Framework, e.g. based on ROSQA standards and aligned with the Quality Audit scope?

b) Are the draft standards consistent with those used internationally?

c) Are the draft standards written in a way which allows for a clear decision to be made about whether or not they have been met?

d) Are the draft standards clear and easily understood?

For those working in the Omani HE sector:

a) Do the draft standards reflect and support the diversity of HE provision in Oman?

b) Do the draft standards appropriately reflect national protocols, guidelines and strategies?

c) Are the draft standards realistic and achievable?

Feedback on other areas not raised here but which may be relevant to the Institutional Standards Review Project is also welcomed. Please submit feedback to Dr Anna Scopaz anna@oaaa.gov.om by 15 August 2013.

A presentation on the Institutional and Program Standards projects can be found on the OAAA website: [http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Presentation/Briefing%20for%20CC%20and%20Ext%20Stak%20June%202013%20v3.2.pps](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Presentation/Briefing%20for%20CC%20and%20Ext%20Stak%20June%202013%20v3.2.pps)
Introduction

Royal Decree 54/2010, which established the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), states that the OAAA is to ensure that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) meet international standards and encourage HEIs to improve their quality. It also calls for the OAAA to collaborate with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to develop, improve and update the process for institutional accreditation. The OAAA therefore needs to maintain the robustness, relevance and currency of its accreditation standards and procedures. Periodic review of the standards and processes is also good practice conducted by most quality assurance agencies around the world and recommended by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQHAAHE). The OAAA’s aim is to produce a set of institutional accreditation standards.

The OAAA's Mission is consistent with its Royal Decree as it strives ‘To encourage and support the Omani higher education sector in meeting international standards; to maintain the national qualifications framework; and, through a transparent rigorous system of institutional and program accreditation, provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman’.

The OAAA is upholding its Mission by undertaking Quality Audits of all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operating in Oman, the first stage of the institutional accreditation process. The OAAA is now developing a set of internationally benchmarked standards which will be used for Standards Assessment in the second stage of institutional accreditation. This two-stage approach will aim to promote excellence in the higher education sector.

Background

The Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA) standards and procedural guides for institutional and programme accreditation was first developed in 2003/2004. Two HEIs underwent the institutional and programme accreditation process in 2004/2005 using ROSQA. Following this, it was decided that the ROSQA standards should be reviewed and a two-stage institutional accreditation process was introduced in order to allow capacity in the sector to be developed. The ROSQA institutional standards and procedural guides were developed as a stand-alone accreditation process; ROSQA standards now need to be revised to work in harmony with the first stage of the two-stage cycle. This process includes

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2 [ROSQA can be downloaded from](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Oman_ROSQA%20all%20part%20one%20.pdf)
extensive benchmarking with a range of international and regional institutional standard models (many of which were not available at the time ROSQA was developed). The revision of ROSQA’s institutional standards and the approach to standards assessment will provide an opportunity for effective consultation with the sector, other relevant stakeholders and to seek feedback from international reviewers. It is important that ‘ownership’ of the Standards Assessment is fostered in the sector.

Quality Audits and Standards Assessments are to be carried out at four yearly intervals resulting in an eight year continuous cycle (see Figure 1). The first stage, Quality Audit, is followed by the second stage, Standards Assessment.

Figure 1

The first round of Quality Audits commenced in 2008. The first Standards Assessments, which for successful institutions will result in accreditation, are due to be carried out in 2014.
Developmental Process for the Conceptual Design Framework and Standards

What process has been used to develop these draft standards? The ROSQA Standards were mapped against the criteria in the Quality Audit Scope. Where there were close matches between the two the ROSQA standard was retained. Some ROSQA standards were rephrased, but their original intent remained. Standards reflecting both ROSQA and the Quality Audit Scope were then benchmarked against standards currently used by seven international accreditation agencies. The benchmark agencies included:

- The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), United Arab Emirates
- The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), Saudi Arabia
- The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA), Malaysia
- The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), United States of America
- The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), United States of America
- The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Australia
- The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA), Estonia

Standards developed by the CAA and NCAAA were selected because the UAE and Saudi Arabia, like Oman, are experiencing rapid growth in their higher education sectors and are at similar stages of development. The MQA standards provide a useful example of requiring certain standards to be met, and suggesting non-compulsory ‘stretch’ or ‘extended’ standards to encourage excellence within the sector in Malaysia. The MSCHE and WASC standards were selected because a number of Omani HEIs have established affiliations with American colleges and universities that have undergone accreditation by these bodies. TEQSA’s standards were selected because they provide an example of a set of newly released accreditation standards (2011) which are already undergoing review and revision. The EKKA standards provide an exemplar of how to acknowledge specific areas of excellence within an institution.

The standards developed and implemented by many other accreditation agencies and commissions were also considered but not included in the benchmarking exercise because of their complexity and lack of clarity. These provided valuable lessons on the need to develop concise and precise standards and guidelines. To this end, the OAAA is committed to developing institutional standards and procedures in a way that is transparent and supports both self-assessment by HEIs and the external review process. The final institutional standards and procedural guide will complement the Quality Audit Manual and together they will form a coherent set of OAAA documents.
Part of the benchmarking exercise considered the number of individual standards different agencies require institutions to address. A wide disparity was noted, with one agency specifying 44 very broad standards open to a variety of interpretation to another agency requiring 1495 separate standards to be addressed in a highly prescriptive manner. The nine areas, 72 standards and around 200 criteria envisaged by the OAAA, to be accompanied by clear and unambiguous guidelines, represents an average number of standards that accreditation agencies require institutions to address.

**What does it mean to be an accredited institution in Oman?**

If an institution meets the required standards, it will be accredited. This accreditation means that the HEI has the capability and capacity to provide higher education consistent with internationally-benchmarked standards. Importantly, a national system of institutional accreditation will provide confidence to the public of the standing of Omani HEIs, supporting the OAAA’s Mission to “provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman”.

The key characteristics of accreditation are the independent verification that an institution has demonstrated that it has the general capability and capacity to deliver higher education programs to students in accordance with the requirements and strategic directions of the sector; that it meets educational, scholarship and research, student support and administrative standards that are applied nationally; and that it conforms to international best practice.

Therefore accreditation is a product of independent verification that an HEI has met a set of institutional standards. Gaining accreditation is important for HEIs because it results in formal public recognition of an HEI’s status and will make them more attractive when recruiting students and staff. Students will be attracted to accredited institutions because of their perceived quality and recognition by employers.

The standards upon which accreditation is based are informed by ROSQA and reflect current international standards. These have been appropriately customised for Oman. The standards will assist institutions in reviewing and improving their educational quality and institutional performance. They will also encourage institutions to recognise the importance of collecting and analysing data to inform institutional decision making, planning and improvement. The type of evidence an institution may choose to submit to demonstrate it meets a standard should reflect its distinct mission, purpose, size and capacity.

**Fundamental Principles**

The fundamental principles underpinning the development and implementation of the revised institutional accreditation standards include:

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1. The responsibility for quality assurance lies with the institution. This was notion was included in ROSQA and is also supported in the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice for External Quality Assurance Agencies: The EQAA recognises that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves. As indicated in ROSQA, an HEI is expected to monitor the quality of its activities using benchmarks that it believes to be appropriate to its mission and circumstances. The institution must decide what it will submit in a Standards Assessment Application in order to demonstrate how it meets the standards. The role of the OAAA is to evaluate the effectiveness of an institution’s internal quality assurance/quality management systems and to verify the institution’s arrangements appropriately meet the standards.

2. The standards are aligned with the Stage 1 Quality Audit scope as presented in the Quality Audit Manual (http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_Quality).
   
i. The scope is divided into nine broad areas (rather than the 10 in ROSQA). The standards are also grouped under the same nine broad areas of activity.

   ii. There are a further 72 distinct sections within the Scope which have been developed into revised standards. Each institutional accreditation standard has a number of criteria which would normally need to be satisfied in order to meet the standard.

   iii. Some of the institutional standards and criteria will not be applicable to all HEIs. This will depend on an HEI’s Vision and Mission and its institutional classification. The rationale for whether an HEI considers standards and criteria not applicable to them will need to be included in the Assessment Application.

   iv. The institutional standards presented in ROSQA are minimum standards; in order to encourage excellence in the higher education sector consideration had been given to including ‘stretch standards’. This approach has not been pursued but excellence will be encouraged (see footnote 6).

3. The standards are based on ROSQA
   
i. Key items listed under each of the 72 Scope sections were mapped against the former ROSQA standards.

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5 For example, under the QAS section on Governance there are 8 elements of the governance system given as examples to be included in the Portfolio: 1) membership of the governing body; 2) the governing body’s terms of reference; 3) clarity of roles and responsibilities; 4) induction for new members, 5) samples of governing body meeting minutes, 6) self evaluation by the governing body, 7) method of recruitment and supervision of the CEO, VC, Deans or Directors, and 8) identification of which ministry has supervisory responsibilities (OAAA Quality Audit Manual, p.18). Where possible, these items were matched to ROSQA standards, for example ROSQA standard 2.1.2 relates to membership of the governing body; ROSQA standards 2.3.2 and 2.3.5 relate to clarity of their roles and responsibilities; ROSQA standards 2.1.9 and 2.4.7 require the governing body to undertake periodic self review and include feedback from individuals external to the governing body.
ii. Where necessary, new standards were included to ensure any gaps identified through the mapping and benchmarking process have been addressed.

iii. The new standards are internationally benchmarked and contextualised for the Omani HE sector and elements within the Quality Audit Scope and ROSQA standards have been benchmarked against standards developed by seven international accreditation agencies, authorities or commissions.

iv. The standards reflect quality audit formal conclusions. All 33 quality audit reports published to date have been reviewed and mapped against the standards to ensure that issues which continue requiring close attention within the Omani HE sector are addressed. For example, of the 33 Quality Audit Reports published to date, 29 Recommendations were made to 22 HEIs identifying the need to improve aspects of their management structure, operation or outcomes. While none of the seven benchmark agencies apply a specific standard to ‘management’ it remains highly relevant to the Omani HE sector and has been retained.

6. The standards endorse national protocols, guidelines and strategies; for example the Oman Ministry of Higher Education’s (MoHE) requirement that all private institutions have a Board of Trustees and all institutions abide by national health and safety regulations. These requirements are reflected in the standards.

7. The standards assessment process seeks to ensure higher education institutions are not overly burdened with the amount and complexity of evidence to be submitted in order to demonstrate that a standard has been met.

i. A set of clear examples is provided after every new standard to illustrate the types of evidence which would indicate that a standard has been met. The OAAA is not prescriptive and will not require HEIs to submit a specified list of policies or documents but HEIs will be informed of the type of evidence which would be suitable. Further examples will be provided in the Standards Assessment Manual.

ii. The OAAA is keen to reduce the administrative burden on HEIs suggesting HEIs provide evidence aligned to data prepared for other government agencies, for example data gathered to respond to the MoHE’s KPI Project.

iii. Granting accreditation status on a HEI will have a profound impact for all stakeholders: therefore, it is imperative that the potential outcomes are clear and the decision-making process (e.g. resulting in accreditation/probation/non-accreditation) is the result of the application of a transparent formula based on a sound rationale and system of measurement.

8. The standards will be assessed using both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

9. The Standards Assessment Manual, which will provide advice on how the new standards will be assessed, will encourage HEIs to undertake an ADRI approach when preparing their self assessment. HEIs will be expected to provide evidence to show the effectiveness of the systems in place in order to meet the standards in all nine areas. Results will be important in evaluating whether a standard has been met or not as will sustainability.
10. The HEI’s response to the formal conclusions in the Quality Audit Reports will also be taken into account in the accreditation decision-making process.

Organisation of the Standards

Careful consideration has been given to how the standards can best be presented for clarity and ease of interpretation by the sector. It is proposed that there are four distinct levels: Area/Section/ Criteria/ Sub-criteria. This organisational structure is represented in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>1. Governance and Management</td>
<td>These areas are the same as the nine areas in the Quality Audit Scope</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>An overarching statement indicates the expectations to be met in the area as a whole</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Area Statement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The institution has a distinct and clearly articulated Mission, Vision and Values that are focused on its identity, its goals, the communities it serves and the national priorities of Oman. Its governance and management structure is clearly defined, is ethical in its conduct, and is governed by sound internal regulations and lines of accountability. The institution effectively manages its institutional affiliations, strategic and operational planning processes, financial, risk and policy management and undertakes regular review of all aspects of its operations in order to assure continuous quality improvement...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Section</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard 1.13 Oversight of Associated Entities (e.g. Owned Companies)</td>
<td>There will be around 72 standards in line with the Quality Audit Scope</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Standard</strong></td>
<td>Where applicable the standard should be met by an HEI in order to be accredited.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The HEI exercises authority and supervisory management and review of all its owned companies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
<td>These criteria should normally be satisfied for an HEI to meet the standard.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key criterion to be met in relation to the standard</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) An accredited institution which has established or controls subsidiary corporations for matters such as service provision, publication, or development of intellectual property possess or demonstrates the following attributes or activities:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i. Consistency between the functions of the entity and the charter and mission of the institution.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ii. Clear specification of the responsibilities and relationships of those entities to the institution.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>iii. Effective oversight of the purposes, functions and activities of the subsidiary by the governing body.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>iv. Provision of audited financial reports and detailed consideration of those reports by relevant committees of the governing body.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>v. Protection for the institution against financial or legal</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Sub-criteria</strong></td>
<td>A criterion will occasionally be made up of several components, each of which should normally be met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A set of discrete requirements within a single criteria</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
liabilities arising from the activities of the entity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Evidence</th>
<th>An indicative list of the types of materials which an HEI can provide to show a standard is met.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evidence that the functions of the entity are directly aligned to the institution’s Vision, Mission and Values</td>
<td>The list is neither exhaustive nor compulsory. Each HEI will decide the type of evidence it feels is most appropriate when preparing its submission for institutional accreditation. Note, oral evidence provided by students and staff during the site visit will also form a crucial element of the assessment that will contribute to the consideration of whether a standard has been met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence that the governing body has effective oversight of the activities of the controlled entity through regular receipt and review of reports, including detailed financial reports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of the regular review of audited financial reports on the financial affairs of the controlled entity.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Outcomes of the accreditation process

The proposed outcomes of the Standards Assessment activity are:

Accredited with Merit\(^6\) (overall or for a specific area)
Accredited
On Probation
Fail (after Reassessment)

At the completion of an Institutional Assessment it will be determined whether the standards have been met or not met. If the standards in all relevant\(^7\) areas have been met an Institutional Accreditation Certificate will be awarded, the result will be published on the OAAA website, and the eight year cycle of Quality Audit and Standards Assessment will re-commence. HEIs demonstrating exceptional provision at an institutional level will be acknowledged as ‘Accredited with Merit’. It will also be possible for institutions demonstrating superior processes and outcomes in specific areas or against specific standards to also be acknowledged as Accredited and with Merit in the nominated area or standard. Institutions that have been deemed to satisfactorily meet all the standards will be ‘Accredited’.

\(^6\) The OAAA is currently reviewing international best practice on the most appropriate and transparent methods for assessing whether an HEI has met a standard. The OAAA is committed to encouraging excellence within the sector and continuous quality improvement in the delivery of higher education in Oman. Consideration is being given to awarding ‘Accredited with Merit’ status to HEIs which have demonstrated that they have not only met a standard but have gone beyond the standard’s requirements. The OAAA will be circulating the method to be applied for the assessment of standards. The Standards Assessment process will be consistent with the process outlined in Figure 1.

\(^7\) For example, the area of Student Learning by Research Programs may not be relevant to all HEIs.
Where standards have not been met, an HEI will be placed on one-to-two year probation and be given an opportunity to address gaps in its higher education provision. After one to two years the HEI will be required to undergo Institutional Reassessment. If all standards have again not been met, and insufficient progress has been shown, then the OAAA will recommend that the Institution’s accreditation be terminated and that it should be no longer be permitted to deliver higher education qualifications.

In line with international good practice, HEIs who are not satisfied with OAAA decisions or consider that they have not been fairly dealt with by the process have the right to appeal\(^8\). Consideration is yet to be given to the Standards Reassessment process post-probation.

\(^8\) The OAAA Appeals Manual is available at [http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_Appeals](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_Appeals)