A joint initiative of the Ministry of Higher Education and the Oman Accreditation Council

Plan for an Omani Higher Education Quality Management System ("The Quality Plan")

DRAFT v4 FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
Last updated: 13 December 2006
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INTRODUCTION

The Planning Framework

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said emphasised the quality of higher education in his 2006 annual address to the Council of Oman. In specific reference to private institutions, but with more generic applicability also, His Majesty required that “objective studies prove ... that their high quality programs will ensure that the students will be successful in the workplace, and also guarantee that the certificates are recognized at both national and international levels. Besides the capacity to absorb large numbers of higher education seekers – a matter that we encourage and urge – these educational institutions should provide high quality education for students, since quantity is useless unless high standards are maintained in order to advance scientific and applicable skills.” 1

These words set a wise and clear direction for higher education in the Sultanate of Oman. The purpose of this Quality Plan is to give effect to His Majesty’s vision by building on current arrangements to establish and maintain an effective quality management system for higher education. It sets out a number of vital goals, objectives and strategies for the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) and the sector at large. Indeed, this Quality Plan represents leading practice in terms of collaborative planning for national quality management.

While this Quality Plan proposes a comprehensive and integrated quality management framework for higher education, it does not address all the issues necessary for a successful and sustainable higher education system (such as strategic allocation of public funds via targeted student scholarships). A key Government document entitled A Strategic Plan for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2006 – 2020 (referred to in this document as the draft Strategic Plan for Education), provides the broader plans for Oman’s education sectors and is currently in the process of being finalised.

Oman has a young, fast-growing higher education sector. Higher Education Providers (HEPs) are owned and governed by a variety of entities, including the MoHE, other Governmental entities, and private owners. Their programs are a mix of locally developed and imported programs. The country’s licensing and accreditation systems are still in early stages of development and implementation.

The draft Strategic Plan for Education recognises many of these issues, and proposes (pp94-95) that the OAC undertake a comprehensive review of the Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA)2, its scope and its effectiveness. Partly to that end, an external consultant has been engaged3 to develop this Quality Plan, which represents progress in reviewing and improving ROSQA.

ROSQA, in effect, is the combination of a number of elements of an overall quality system. It includes a system for classifying institutions of higher education; a qualifications and credit framework; institutional standards; and processes for institutional and program licensing and accreditation. Some of these elements need to be updated, and missing elements need to be created. It is not proposed to recreate a new, single document called ROSQA v2, because this would be too complex and large. Instead, it is proposed to develop a total quality system in an integrated fashion and to disseminate the elements of that system as appropriate (making as much use of the Internet as possible).

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2 http://www.mohe.gov.om/C%20PART%20TWO%20GUIDES%20APPROVED.PDF
3 Martin Carroll
**Quality Plan Format**

This *Quality Plan* sets out some broad principles for an effective quality management system, and then identifies 12 goals. Each goal will be achieved through attainment of a number of specific objectives. The objectives have not been detailed in terms of precise project plans, key performance indicators, budgets etc. at this stage. Once this *Quality Plan* is finalized, operational planning for each approved objective will commence.

That said, the current environment is such that it has been necessary to proceed towards some of the objectives rather than await finalisation of the overall *Quality Plan*. Where that has been the case, progress reports are provided in this document. Care has been taken to ensure that such progress has not substantially prejudiced genuine consultations on the draft versions of this *Quality Plan*.

This plan should be considered in conjunction with three posters which are available as downloads from the OAC website:

- Licensing and Accreditation System in Oman: A Proposal
- Developing Standards Based Accreditation in Oman
- Accreditation vs. Recognition of Programs in Oman

Discussions about quality inevitably involve a plethora of terms and acronyms that require definition. As such, a list of terms and acronyms used in this document, and their intended meanings, is provided in Appendix A.

**Consultation Process**

Approval of this *Quality Plan* would constitute an extremely significant stage in the development of Omani higher education. As such, it is appropriate to provide interested parties with the opportunity to provide comment on drafts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultation Activity</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General information collection and discussions of concepts with HEPs. Development of first drafts.</td>
<td>Throughout first half of 2006</td>
<td>Formal visits have been made by the OAC to a representative sample of 13 HEPs, and many other discussions have taken place (for example, during the Training Programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop with OAC to discuss draft v3</td>
<td>5 April 2006</td>
<td>Completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops with appropriate senior MoHE officials to discuss draft v3.</td>
<td>6 May 2006</td>
<td>Completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary briefing to the Oman Quality Network (OQN) of the key elements of draft v3.</td>
<td>31 May 2006</td>
<td>Completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key ideas in draft v3 to be tested against international opinion.</td>
<td>April-November 2006</td>
<td>Completed. The ideas have received strong backing from the international community. Posters on the proposed Quality System won “Best Poster” award at the AUQF2006⁴. A paper on the Training Program and OQN won “Best Paper” at AAIR2006⁵.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft v4 posted on OAC website for the sector’s consideration.</td>
<td>16 December 2006</td>
<td>In progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop with sector to discuss draft v4 in detail.</td>
<td>23-24 January 2007</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft v5 prepared and submitted to the OAC and MoHE for final approval.</td>
<td>February 2007</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This draft is designed for public consultation. Interested parties are invited to consider this draft and participate in one or both of the following:

(a) send a written submission to martin@oac.gov.om (or mail to Oman Accreditation Council, P.O. Box 1255, P.C. 133, Al Khuwair) by no later than 31 December 2006; and/or

(b) attend a two-day consultation workshop on 23-24 January 2007.

After these processes, the Quality Plan will be revised and presented to the OAC Board and to H.E. the Minister of Higher Education for final approval.

**Quality Plan Governance**

The MoHE will assume leadership responsibility for some of the objectives in this Quality Plan and (to the extent that it is a separate entity) the OAC with assume responsibility for others. In order to ensure that the overall progress is integrated and mutually-supportive, it is proposed that a Quality Plan Steering Group, chaired by H.E. the Minister of Higher Education, be established to oversee the implementation of this Quality Plan once it has been finalized.

**International Review**

There are a number of international associations, consortia and fora which focus on quality management in higher education. The most significant in terms of national, regional or state systems for external quality assurance (incorporating accreditation, assessment and audit) is

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⁵ The Australasian Association of Institutional Research ([www.aair.org.au](http://www.aair.org.au))

Guideline #9 in the GGP asks that the OAC have “a system of continuous quality assurance of its own activities, emphasising flexibility (in response to the changing nature of higher education) and quality improvements. The agency carries out self-review of its activities, e.g. based on data collected and analysis, including consideration of its own effects and value. The agency is subject to external reviews at regular intervals, and there is evidence that the results are used.”

To that end, the MoHE and OAC should undertake a combined self review in 2010 against the GGP and this Quality Plan, and then commission from INQAAHE an external, independent audit of that self-review in 2011. The report of that audit ought to be public.

Internationally there are several leading external quality assurance (EQA) agencies which have been through this process, such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) which conducted its self-review in 2005 and was subject to audit in 2006 by an independent panel including (but not limited to) INQAAHE members. The Chilean National Commission of Accreditation (CNAP) went through a similar review process in 2005. These EQAs may provide valuable benchmark sources of advice and expertise.

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6 [Http://www.inqaahe.org](http://www.inqaahe.org). At present, the MoHE is a full member. If the OAC attains full independence from the MoHE, then it may be appropriate for the OAC to join INQAAHE as a full member in its own capacity.
8 [http://www.cnap.cl](http://www.cnap.cl)
OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

National Assessment

Each country is different in its requirements for a national quality management system. There are many elements that must work together to provide an effective and comprehensive system. These elements are provided by a variety of entities. The precise combination of elements and entities will vary depending upon such variables as the maturity (age, size, complexity) of the sector; who exercises governance over the HEPs; whether or not the providers are agents, offering home-grown programs or even self-accrediting; whether there are single or multiple accreditation authorities within the national framework; and the political will.

With that in mind, the table below outlines some of the key elements of a national higher education quality management system that would be appropriate for Oman at this time. They are based, in part, on leading international standards and declarations. The second column provides a brief analysis of the current situation.

Table 2. Analysis of the Oman Situation against a Desirable Quality System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desirable Quality System Elements</th>
<th>Summary Analysis of Oman Situation (as of April 2006)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A strategic plan for the role higher education it should play in the development of the nation.</td>
<td>A draft document entitled <em>A Strategic Plan for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2006 – 2020</em> is currently being considered by Government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification system of higher education provider entities.</td>
<td>There is an institutional classification system in place. This defines type of institution (institute, college, university college, university) according to breadth of program offerings and depth of qualifications. However, there is no standard classification system of education with which to define the breadth, and the use of levels of qualification as a classification variable is problematic. Also, the current classification system does not differentiate between whether a HEP may accredit its own courses (a self-accrediting institution, or SAI) or not (NSAI).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear processes for establishing higher education providers (i.e. Provider Licensing).</td>
<td>There is an institutional licensing system in place. This system requires improvement in terms of standards and the process design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear separation of responsibility between the governance of HEPs and the imposition of the regulatory framework (e.g. via Charters). HEPs may govern and manage themselves in accordance with the national strategy and standards (i.e. ‘institutional autonomy’ as endorsed by the Lisbon Convention⁹).</td>
<td>There are regulations for the governance structures of HEPs. However, in practice there is considerable confusion and overlap in responsibilities between the supervisory role of the MoHE and the governance role of HEP Boards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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⁹ Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region (The European Treaty Series, n°165, Council of Europe – UNESCO joint Convention), Lisbon, 11 April 1997. Known as the ‘Lisbon Convention’, the European ministers responsible for higher education, while acknowledging the valid and valued differences in cultural, religious and political systems of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate standards for steering the development of HEPs and ensuring that they have the capability and capacity to deliver higher education of an appropriate quality (i.e. Provider Standards).</td>
<td>There is a set of Provider Accreditation standards. The sector has found these useful. However, the set is incomplete (e.g. no risk management). Also, the set comprises only minima-type standards and does not allow for stretch targets. Many people in the sector find the current standards too difficult for the Omani context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear processes, independent from the governance and management of HEPs, for assessing compliance with those standards (i.e. Provider Accreditation).</td>
<td>The OAC has a process for accrediting HEPs against quality standards. This process needs to be supported with robust policies, manuals, staffing and training. Also, there is considerable confusion and overlap in responsibilities between the supervisory role of the MoHE and the external quality assurance role of the OAC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate standards for ensuring that higher education programs are of an appropriate quality and aligned to the developmental needs of the country (i.e. Academic Standards).</td>
<td>There are no national program standards. Reliance is placed on standards provided by offshore HEPs. The strength of the quality assurance process used to maintain these standards in Oman varies between HEPs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear processes, independent from the governance and management of the institution, for assessing compliance with those standards (i.e. Program Accreditation).</td>
<td>The OAC has a process for accrediting programs. However, this process needs to be supported with academic standards, manuals, professional staff and trained external reviewers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation processes based on the participation of senior, professional, credible and trained external reviewers (particularly national and international academics but also captains of industry and community leaders). This is an INQAAHE guideline.</td>
<td>There is no national database of trained external reviewers. There is no training program for external reviewers. To date, reviewers have been commissioned on an ad hoc basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means for ensuring accredited programs are recognized in other jurisdictions (i.e. international recognition, articulation and credit transfer).</td>
<td>There is no process for negotiating mutual recognition agreements with other governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credible and authoritative appeals processes (for licensing, accreditation and audit). This is an INQAAHE guideline.</td>
<td>There is no formal process for appealing against licensing or accreditation decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means for terminating offerings that are not of adequate standing (i.e. risk management).</td>
<td>There is no systematic approach for protecting students and employers from poor quality programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means for encouraging the development of a quality assurance and quality enhancement culture (i.e. ensuring the systems within HEPs are effective and continuously improving).</td>
<td>There are no structured quality assurance systems (such as quality audits) or quality enhancement systems (such as training programs or information sharing networks). In general, the quality management capabilities of the sector are low. However, the sector is enthusiastic.</td>
</tr>
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different countries, attached “great importance to the principle of institutional autonomy” and was “conscious of the need to uphold and protect this principle”.

Strategic Assumptions

As a result of the analysis and consultations conducted to date, the following strategic assumptions have been derived which underpin the goals and objectives of this Quality Plan.

- Oman wishes to be able to offer its own diploma and degree programs, rather than being dependent on international providers.
- However, it also wishes to continue providing international diplomas and degrees.
- Whether the programs have national or international origins, they must meet international standards as evidenced through acceptance of credit transfer.
- The institutional quality assurance requirements for an HEP providing only imported programs will be different from a HEP also providing its own programs.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GOALS

Guiding Principles

It is proposed that the following set of principles underpin the development of this Quality Plan and its subsequent implementation. All the goals and objectives must be consistent with these principles.

- **Comprehensive & Integrated.** The quality management system should be as simple as possible, but not simpler. An effective system requires many important elements (standards, qualifications framework etc.), working together in an integrated fashion.

- **International Recognition.** Whatever Oman does must stand up to international scrutiny in order to facilitate credit transfer and to maintain a good reputation. In particular, the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice will be followed.

- **Cooperation.** The OAC, the MoHE and the sector itself must work cooperatively to fulfill this Quality Plan.

- **Enhancement and Assurance.** In order for the Omani higher education sector to progress to international standards it is necessary to focus equally on quality enhancement and quality assurance.

- **Sustainable Omanisation.** Implementation of the quality management system must be sustainable within Oman and manageable independently from other countries. This will be achieved over time, by building the capacity and capability of the Omani sector in terms of quality awareness, standards, processes and skills.

- **Peer Review.** The involvement of academic and professional peers in the quality assurance in higher education (for example, when setting standards or making professional judgements about providers or programs in light of those standards) is of fundamental importance. Leading academic peers are the most competent authorities to effectively evaluate academic quality. Review Panels act professionally on behalf of all interested stakeholders – not least the students. If they have confidence in the quality of a HEP, then they advise other stakeholders to have similar confidence. Therefore, in convincing the Review Panel of its quality, a HEP is, in effect, seeking to convince all stakeholders.

- **Sound Decisions.** Decision-making processes must be fair, professional and based on evidence and merit. The methods by which decisions are made need to be acceptable not only within Oman, but also to the international higher education community.

- **Role Modelling.** The MoHE and the OAC will exemplify the professionalism they wish for the sector.

- **Speed and Timing.** The system should be developed as fast as possible, but not faster. The overall journey to a world class quality management system will take about 10 years, but significant progress can be made in the next 1 to 2 years if investment is made in system and sector development (rather than in implementing an unsatisfactory system).

- **Efficiency.** The system should cost as little as possible, but not less. The cost (in time and money) on HEPs and Government should be the minimum necessary to effectively assure the quality of Omani higher education. Conversely, care must be taken to not under invest, thereby undermining the chances of success.
Summary of Goals

The following goals outline the minimum requirements for the development of a comprehensive quality management system designed specifically for the Omani higher education sector at this point in time.

1. 

   Educational Frameworks. The educational system infrastructure will comprise integrated frameworks for fields of study, qualifications and credit, and supporting policies, which will ensure that Oman’s education system can interface with the education systems of benchmark countries.

2. 

   Standards for Higher Education Providers. A comprehensive suite of higher education provider standards will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will guide provider licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.

3. 

   Standards for Student Learning. A comprehensive suite of standards for student learning will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will help shape the future of the Omani society, guide program licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.

4. 

   Provider Quality Audit. A national system of independent audits of the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems of higher education providers will be established to encourage the maintenance and advancement of those systems.

5. 

   Provider Licensing and Accreditation. A national system of provider licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides confidence to the public of the standing of Omani higher education providers.

6. 

   Program Licensing and Accreditation. A national system of higher education program licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides confidence to the public of the standing of higher education programs offered in Oman and facilitates student mobility.

7. 

   Appeals. The quality management system will be regarded as fair and credible by being supported with a professional appeals process that meets international standards.

8. 

   Foundation Program Quality Assurance. A national system of Foundation Program reviews will be established, which helps ensure that those programs adequately prepare students for their higher education studies.

9. 

   Research Training Quality Assurance. The quality management system will ensure that higher education plays a leading role in developing national research capacity and capability.

10. 

    Teaching Quality Assurance. The quality of higher education teaching in Oman will, in the interests of providing the best possible education to students, rise to a level comparable with benchmark countries.

11. 

    National Quality Management Information. National data sets and other information will be collected, analysed and, where appropriate, made public to monitor progress with the Quality Plan and to facilitate benchmarking and student choice.

12. 

    General Capability and Capacity. Government will assist the higher education sector to develop the capability and capacity to comply with the quality management system, and the will to exceed it.

Each of these goals will be achieved through specific objectives and strategies. These are outlined in the following sections.

A summary of all goals and objectives is provided in Appendix B. A summary timeline for implementation of the HEP Quality Audit, HEP Accreditation, Program Accreditation and Foundation Program Review processes is provided in Appendix C.
1 EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

1.1 Goal

The educational system infrastructure will comprise integrated frameworks for fields of study, qualifications and credit, and supporting policies, which will ensure that Oman’s education system can interface with the education systems of benchmark countries.

1.2 Background

The purpose of this goal is to provide the policy infrastructure necessary to transform Omani higher education from a system dependent upon other countries to a mature system capable of providing its own degree programs at international standards.

The fundamental infrastructure of a higher education system includes (and is not limited to) the following:

- a classification system for HEPs (the ‘providers’ of study);
- a classification system for fields of study (the ‘subjects’ of study);
- a credit framework (the ‘amount’ of study); and
- a qualifications framework (the ‘levels’ of study).

These are essential to describe higher education for the purposes of planning, funding, standard-setting, accreditation and analysis.

Oman needs frameworks which facilitate recognition and transfer of credit and qualifications nationally and internationally and across all forms of post secondary education. Indeed, one of the major challenges internationally is to develop frameworks which will enable comparable measures of study to be transferred within and between educational jurisdictions. In Europe, Ministers with responsibility for higher education have made substantial progress on this issue starting with the 1997 Lisbon convention and including declarations at Sorbonne (1998), Bologna (1999), Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003). While their focus has been on building a stronger Europe based on a knowledge economy, and will take some time to bring to fruition, there are central themes in those documents which are applicable worldwide.

Oman is and needs to be cognizant of these themes and developments. It must prepare itself for a world in which credit transfer and recognition of qualifications will be undertaken in a framework set by the major players, such as the United States of America and a consolidated European system.

A critical first step is to determine, tailor and implement a preferred international credit and qualifications framework. Oman has already made significant progress in this regard, having adopted a credit and qualifications framework built around a four year bachelor degree. However, implementation of that framework has been constrained by conflicting policies. For example, the requirement for private colleges and universities to offer programs of affiliate institutions in other, non-specified countries has meant that many different credit and qualification frameworks have been brought into the country. There has been no specific, systematic process of mapping these programs against the Oman Qualifications Framework and making this information public for the purposes of recognition and credit transfer.
The framework’s implementation in terms of international recognition has also been problematic. Considerations of international credit and qualification equivalence have tended to focus on quantitative indicators only, such as number of hours of study or number of years of full time study required to complete a program. This crude approach ignores the potential for dramatic variance in the quality of that study. It is for this reason that international equivalence is dependent for its credibility on an internationally credible program accreditation system also being in place. This is a key area in which the guiding principle of “Integration” is critical.

1.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To revise the classification system for Higher Education Providers.

The first dimension of the classification system is the nomenclature for different types of HEP. ROSQA provides for three: College; University College and University. There are a number of areas in which this system could be improved:

- The current basis for differentiation is the level of qualifications issued and the number of fields of study (for which there is no robust framework – see Objective 1.3(b)). In these matters, ROSQA itself contains inconsistent details.

- In practice, the nomenclature used in the sector does not fully align with the ROSQA requirements.

- This nomenclature system is incomplete in that it does not encompass all providers in Oman offering higher education programs, such as the Higher College of Technology.

In addition to rectifying these issues, there are also new factors which a revised classification system could address. These include the following:

- Differentiating between teaching-only and teaching and research institutions, with the former being colleges and the latter being universities. Under that system, colleges could offer any taught degree (bachelors, masters and conceivably professional doctorates like the EdD or the DBA) and Universities could offer taught and research-based degrees (including masters by research and PhD).

- Reviewing the governance arrangements for different classifications of ownership. Simply distinguishing between ‘public’ and ‘private’ does not suffice because, at least, public HEPs are ‘owned’ by different Ministries, therefore giving rise to variability in how the ownership prerogatives are exercised.

- Differentiating between a HEP which is an agent for another award-granting institution (hereafter a “HEP Agent”), and a HEP which develops and confers its own awards. For the most part, private colleges are agents for award programs developed by institutions in other countries. Some will wish to remain in this mode of operating, while others aspire to develop and offer their own award programs. The latter of these requires a considerably more advanced type of institution, in which the staff are competent and experienced in curriculum design (including content, instructional and assessment) and the institution itself has robust course and program approval and review processes.

(b) To adopt a standard educational classification framework.

Standard educational classification frameworks are used to structure the many topics of educational courses of study into cognate disciplines. They have a pedagogical basis and practical utility (including, for example, codification of courses that will facilitate credit recognition and transfer).
Oman will need to develop a standard educational classification framework broadly comparable with the relevant international standard, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which was developed by UNESCO to facilitate comparisons of education statistics and indicators within and between countries. One example is the Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED)\(^\text{10}\).

**Progress Report:** A Standard Classification of Education Working Group, chaired by Dr Said Al Rabiey, has been established by the OAC. Its membership includes representatives from public and private HEPs, the OAC, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Manpower.

(c) **To revise, maintain and disseminate a common credit framework to facilitate credit transfer, accreditation and recognition processes.**

ROSQA provides a credit framework. Although this would benefit from further development, it is fundamentally sound. However, the extent to which it is being systematically implemented in Oman requires attention. This must happen in conjunction with the development of Student Learning Standards (see Goal 3). In particular, HEPs may require assistance with understanding and applying the framework when looking to develop their own courses and programs. This may involve targeted workshops and training modules.

(d) **To revise, maintain and disseminate the common Oman Qualifications Framework.**

ROSQA includes an Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF) with six levels of qualification. By international standards it is a comparatively simplistic framework limited in breadth and depth:

- it does not accommodate credit mobility between higher education and other postsecondary forms of training and education;
- it does not include postgraduate certificates;
- it does not specifically address the nature and level of honours at either Bachelor’s or Master’s level;
- It does parenthetically include the (contentious) Associate Degree, but with no explanation as to the nature of this qualification that distinguishes it from a diploma.

There is scope for refining the qualifications framework and for providing greater detail as to the pedagogical meaning of each qualification.

The MoHE and the OAC may wish to consider recommending legislation which will protect use of higher education qualification titles in this framework by law (as is done in Australia and New Zealand). Specifically, lawful usage would be as per the arrangements set out in this Plan. Unlawful use of qualification titles is misleading and harmful to students and employers, and therefore ought to result in appropriate punitive measures.

**Progress Report:** A subcommittee of the Standard Classification of Education Working Group is developing a set of recommendations for improving the current OQF. These will be made available for public consultation.

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\(^{10}\) See [http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/0/3AB4B1E1404D7C91CA256AA001FCA54?opendocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/0/3AB4B1E1404D7C91CA256AA001FCA54?opendocument).
(e) To map credit and qualifications equivalence with other international frameworks and make this information publicly available.

Internationally-referenced Credit and Qualifications Frameworks facilitate benchmarking, mutual recognition and transfer of credit and qualifications. The entity responsible for exempting programs from Omani accreditation (Objective 6.3(e)) based on international accreditation ought, as part of its deliberations, to map the program against the Omani Credit and Qualifications Framework. If exemption is granted then this information ought to be made publicly available in an online database so that students and employers may be entirely clear about how the resulting qualification fits into the Omani framework.

(f) To develop intergovernmental processes for negotiating and agreeing mutual recognition of higher education credit and qualifications.

The ultimate test of the relevance of accreditation, and its most tangible benefit, is whether or not other countries will accept 100% credit transfer at the same level of study. The validity and relevance of program accreditation is strengthened by entering into mutual recognition arrangements with other external quality agencies as appropriate. At present, there are no formalised processes for developing mutual recognition agreements. Omani HEPs currently have to negotiate these with other HEPs on an ad hoc basis. There is an opportunity to undertake this important function on a government to government basis, thereby maximising the potential for Omani graduates to have their degrees recognised in other countries, and minimizing the burden on individual HEPs.

Also, and apropos earlier comments about the European efforts, it may be appropriate to consider encouraging Gulf Nations to adopt a common credit and qualifications framework. This is perhaps a logical precursor to the more complex development of common accreditation systems, which have been discussed but in respect of which no progress has yet been made.

(g) To establish an Omani glossary of terms used in quality assurance (in the broadest sense).

A problem evident around the world is the lack of an agreed glossary for the growing plethora of terms associated with quality assurance (in its broadest scope). This can lead to a range of difficulties, most notably miscommunication. Therefore, a precursor to the introduction of standards and, indeed, to the introduction of a national quality management system, is to establish a glossary of terms (as such, this particular Objective could have nested within any of the Goals). A national glossary will be established whereby terms related to quality assurance in higher education are able to be commonly shared and understood nationally and, where feasible, internationally.

It will not be necessary to design this Glossary from scratch. ROSQA provides some definitions and there are a number of international glossaries that can be referred to, including that of INQAAHE, AUQA and the Lisbon Declaration.

The Glossary will be the responsibility of the OAC and will be publicly available on the OAC website.

Once the glossary is posted online, a workshop could be held on the language of quality management, focusing on ensuring semantically appropriate and accurate translations between English and Arabic.

Progress Report: A subcommittee of the Standard Classification of Education Working Group has commenced development of the Glossary. Submissions are welcome and may be sent to martin@oac.gov.om.
(h) **To develop and implement policy in relation to ownership of intellectual property associated with curricula.**

The issue of ownership of curriculum is obscure. The ready availability of course outlines, teaching materials, supplementary readings etc. does not necessarily mean that their copyright is forfeit any more than it does for a book one can check out of a library. Different countries, and different HEPs within countries, have varying views on this matter.

Oman relies heavily on importing curricula from foreign accredited HEPs. It is necessary to be certain that if there are any applicable copyrights and other forms of intellectual property ownership (such as licensing agreements) involved then the Omani HEPs and, indeed, regulatory system must obtain all appropriate permissions. This issue will become particularly important when Omani HEPs seek to take the curriculum of their affiliate organisation and use it to establish their own Omani-accredited award program, because any arrangements embedded in the initial affiliation agreement may not survive after the program is accredited in Oman.

The Omani Ministry of Higher Education has a responsibility to protect Oman from legal action or attacks on the reputation and integrity of Omani higher education by foreign parties relating to improper use in Oman of foreign-owned intellectual property. As such, a policy could be developed, based on national and international legal advice, on means of identifying and managing ownership of intellectual property in the context of higher education provision.

(i) **To develop and implement policy in relation to ‘qualification multiplication’.**

The qualification is the higher education award granted upon the successful completion of an accredited program of study. The number of types of higher education qualifications has expanded in recent decades. There are now many types of certificates (including the graduate certificate, postgraduate certificate and certificate of proficiency), diplomas (including the advanced diploma, higher diploma, graduate diploma and postgraduate diploma) and even doctorates (PhD, ‘taught’; or ‘professional doctorates’, *honoris causa* doctorates and higher doctorates such as DLitt). While these all fulfill a useful role, it cannot be assumed that employers understand the sometimes subtle distinctions between them (especially between the graduate and postgraduate diplomas or between the diploma and the associate degree).

To compound the confusion, many qualifications are now ‘nested’. For example, whereas four years of study used to result in a single qualification – the degree – it may now result in four qualifications (a certificate after one year a diploma after two years; an advanced diploma after three years and a Bachelor’s degree after four years). In systems where students are entitled to uplift these qualifications while remaining enrolled in the same overall program of study this is sometimes known as ‘qualification multiplication.’ It can result in the population being ‘flooded’ with up to four times more qualifications than previously, for the same amount of student learning. This scenario is caused by wanting to promote student mobility, whereby students can either exit at any time with a qualification, or transfer to other provider entities with evidence of credit for work already completed from a specific provider.

Qualification multiplication is compounded even further by the prospect of two entirely separate degrees being issued to student for completing a single program of study. This can potentially arise when the program of study is accredited in two different jurisdictions, especially in two different countries. One possible consequence is that future employers are mislead as to precisely how much student learning has been achieved.
Some countries have responded to this issue with policies about the conditions under which a qualification may be uplifted. These policies have included such concepts as ‘multi-badged’ degrees and attaining qualification on termination of study only.

Oman should also develop policy to address qualification multiplication in the interests of safeguarding employers and international credibility. To be effective, it requires a nationally integrated approach. There is an international research project here for Oman which may result in national policy on the matter. It could also lead to a publication in an internationally refereed journal and/or conference presentations, which would be advantageous to the growing reputation of the Omani higher education system.

(j) To develop and implement policy in relation to recognition of prior learning and recognition of prior experience to facilitate consistent standards.

There is further policy work to be done in the areas of Recognition of Prior Learning and Recognition of Prior Experience. This is a complex area in which quality controls are typically less robust (assessing the quantum of credit to be awarded for prior experience, for example, is loose art) and consequentially, standards can slip.
2 STANDARDS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

2.1 Goal
A comprehensive suite of HEP standards will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will guide provider licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.

2.2 Background
The purpose of this goal is to provide clear direction to HEPs about what is expected of them, and clear guidance to Provider Licensing and Accreditation Panels (see Goal 5). Ultimately, this goal will result in more comprehensive protection for the sector from the consequences of inadequate, inappropriate and incomplete standards.

The ROSQA document outlines a set of Provider Standards. These standards provide a good start for developing a mature accreditation system. However, they are incomplete and assume that accreditation is only concerned with the achievement of minima rather than also with the encouragement of quality enhancement. These standards need to be revised.

2.3 Objectives and Strategies
(a) To develop a revised set of standards for Higher Education Provider licensing and accreditation.

Many Deans in the sector have expressed concern that the standards are too tough. It would be inappropriate to “dumb down” standards to make them easier to achieve. However, there are strategies which could be applied to help the sector achieve an appropriate set of institutional standards.

- Revise those standards which are specific to Oman (such as staffing requirements) with a view to ensuring they are realistic.
- Revise those standards which were sourced internationally and may not apply well to the Omani context (e.g. concerning governance arrangements).
- Support some of the tougher standards with quality enhancement strategies (see Goal 12).

- Recognise that different types of HEPs require different sets of standards (see Figure 1 below). The Provider Standards will differentiate between those HEPs which are Agents for the programs of other HEPs and those which develop and provide their own programs (see Objective 1.3(a)). In the case of the latter, the standards will need to include the advanced provider requirements for curriculum development, internal approval, moderation (for higher level study) and review. Agent HEPs ought not be expected to comply with standards that are not specifically relevant to their activities. The Provider Standards could also differentiate on any other Provider classifications. For example, if the current classification system is retained then each standard would have three levels of outcome specified: for colleges, for university colleges and for universities. This will provide clarity to the sector and reduce the dependence on Provider Accreditation Panels’ subjectivities.

- Diversify the type of standards beyond only thresholds. Standards shape behaviour. There are different types of standards (e.g. minima; stretch targets, normative
standards) and these shape different types of behaviour\textsuperscript{11}. For example, some will demand compliance with minimum requirements, which is a risk management philosophy; some will encourage (but not insist upon) innovation, which is a quality enhancement philosophy; some will reward attainment of best practice, which is an excellence philosophy. Each type of standard is useful, but not in every instance. Therefore, standard-setters ought to be very careful and particular about what types of standards they use for particular intended outcomes.

![Relationship between HEP Standards and HEP Agent Standards](image)

\textbf{Figure 1. Relationship between HEP Standards and HEP Agent Standards}

Also, there are issues which are currently omitted from the current standards but which international experience shows are of fundamental importance (e.g. external moderation of final exams for years 4 and above; or formal risk management processes).

A standing Provider Standards Subcommittee should be established to revise the current standards in ROSQA and recommend an improved set which will reflect current best practice in both standards design and content. The Provider Standards Subcommittee would thereafter meet every two years to maintain the currency, comprehensiveness, relevance and appropriateness of the standards.

\textsuperscript{11} See, for example, Carroll, M. I. (2003, June). Does Auditing Against Standards Encourage Masterpieces or Paint-by-numbers? Assessing & Evaluating Quality in Higher Education, 28 (3).
3 STANDARDS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

3.1 Goal

A comprehensive suite of standards for student learning will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will help shape the future of the Omani society, guide program licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.

3.2 Background

Standards for Student Learning are the blueprints by which a country designs the type of nation it wants to be. Program accreditation is the means by which achievement is assured. As such, these academic standards are of fundamental importance. In the case of a mature and complex higher education sector, the responsibility for setting program standards will be shared among relevant stakeholder groups (governments; professional bodies; independent quality agencies, universities themselves, the public media etc.). In the case of a developing country like Oman, with a rapidly growing higher education sector, it may be most effective for standards to remain the prerogative of Government.

Thus far reliance has been placed upon the international affiliated institutions to provide and maintain these standards. This may be appropriate while the degree being awarded is that of the affiliate institution (although they may not always have effective quality assurance systems in place to ensure that the standards are being maintained – see Objective 6.3(e)).

At present, Oman does not have its own program standards. Given the comparative inexperience of the sector, this is a fundamental impediment to the accreditation of home grown programs. The current system of program accreditation expects that one or two international academics will exercise peer judgement in determining the appropriateness of a program. This is not a credible system because it is too prone to the variability of peer review (the INQAAHE GGP asks that an accreditation body should make "consistent decisions, even if the judgements are formed by different groups, panels, teams or committees").

A superior process would be to support peer review with clearly defined standards for the relevant field of study. Omani standards could usefully have three forms: a set of attributes/characteristics which all degree students are expected to have mastered during the course of their studies; discipline-specific standards that guide overall curriculum development; and research methods curricula. High quality higher education is traditionally and, arguably, inexorably linked with research. For ease of consideration the research methods proposal has been presented separately in Goal 9. The other two proposals are addressed in the following objectives.

3.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To develop, maintain and disseminate a set of national graduate attributes.

Internationally there is, at present, a massive emphasis on student learning outcomes. It is the topic of many international conferences and much literature. One major

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12 See, for example, Proceedings of the 2005 Student Experience Conference at http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/sec/.
strategy that has emerged in recent years is that of developing generic sets of graduate attributes (also known as generic skills, core graduate outcomes etc.). Within a HEP or country (depending on who sets the Graduate Attributes) all graduates of a Bachelor’s degree are expected to have attained these attributes to an appropriate standard. Common sets include such attributes as:

- Independent and lifelong learning skills;
- Good verbal and written communication skills;
- Demonstrated analytical inquiry;
- Ability to work constructively in a team.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said has successfully based the development of modern Oman on the dual strategy of embracing international ideas and practices while retaining what is important about Oman. If it is accepted that standards are the blueprint for society then there is a tangible pedagogical means by which this joint strategy can be given effect. A set of Graduate Attributes within Oman could include, for example, an understanding of Omani values and heritage in a global society.

It is proposed that a small working group be established, chaired by a senior and respected Omani academic and including at least two other academics from Omani HEPs and at least two international experts. The task of the Graduate Attributes Working Group will be to develop and recommend a set of Graduate Attributes based on international benchmarking and consultation with Oman HEPs, industry and community leaders.

Once the Graduate Attributes are approved, it will be necessary for a small team – perhaps comprising the above Working Group’s chairperson and professional staff from the MoHE – to visit HEPs and provide training on how to incorporate Graduate Attributes into extant and new curricula (including teaching methods and assessment).

(b) To develop and implement national assessment of student attainment of national graduate attributes upon entry to higher education programs and upon graduation from those programs as one means for determining the value added by higher education.

One of the most difficult aspects of working with student learning outcomes is assessment. At primary and secondary levels of schooling the detailed assessment standards are often set by national or state governments and implemented through public examinations (for example, O and A levels in England). In many instances, the results of these assessments are used to influence or determine entrance into higher education.

For higher education, at the program level, and for the purpose of formal credit, detailed assessment is usually the responsibility of the institution awarding the degree. Broader assessment standards are factored into program accreditation. However, there is still specific scope for detailed assessment standard at the national level and implemented through public examinations. This scope relates to the national Graduate Attributes (see Objective 3.3(a)). A classic pretest-intervention-posttest design is proposed, whereby students are assessed on entrance into the program, and then again on graduation.

There are few (if any) countries in the world that have such a system in place, although desire for such a system is strong. Oman has ideal conditions for trialing such a system.

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14 Alverno College in the USA is particularly noted for its successes in student learning outcomes and may provide an appropriate member for the Graduate Attributes Working Group. Dr Mary E. Diez, Graduate Dean & Professor of Education at Alverno College, may be a useful contact.
because it is small, has no competing/conflicting assessment systems to remove or work around, and is comparatively easily centrally controlled.

If an effective national assessment of student attributes system can be developed then consideration may be given to using this as an entrance test. This is a complex issue that will require extensive consideration.

During earlier stages of consultation, this issue was deemed to be of lower priority.

(c) **To develop, maintain and disseminate student learning standards for narrow fields of study.**

It is proposed that a Student Learning Standards Working Group be established for each Narrow Field of Study (using the Standard Classification System developed via objective 1.3(b)). Their task is to develop Student Learning Standards for their Narrow Field of Study. The working groups would report to a Program Standards Committee (of the MoHE/OAC) and be supported by professional staff from the OAC.

Student Learning Standards sit at a conceptual level above program curriculum and are intended to guide the processes of curriculum development, program licensing and program accreditation. They have two dimensions: intended student learning outcomes, and provision of resources directly related to attainment of those outcomes (other than those generic issues already adequately covered in the Provider Standards).

There are many Narrow Fields of Study, and it will be necessary to prioritise these. Given the currently available resources, it is envisaged that there could be no more than seven or eight working groups per year, with each group achieving its primary objective within six months. Preliminary analyses suggests that up to 70% of all higher education programs currently being offered through private HEPs (a similar analysis for public HEPs has not yet been conducted) could be addressed through a handful of narrow fields (in business; computer science, IT, electrical engineering, accounting and English), meaning that significant progress could be made within one year.

Wherever possible, the working groups will source current and appropriate international standards (e.g. ABET) and tailor these for Oman. Each working group would be chaired by a senior academic from Oman (probably via SQU) and include at least two international professors from that field of study, at least one other senior academic who is an Omani (and preferably not from the same HEP as the chair).

A key challenge will be ensuring that the suite of student learning standards will be designed in a manner which enables their application to multidisciplinary degree programs. One international trend in higher education is towards multidisciplinary programs, in which a program of study leading to the award of a degree may encompass multiple narrow fields of study.

Until such standards are developed, it would be inappropriate to continue with the current flawed system of program accreditation.

**Progress Report:** A template for student learning standards is currently under development. Four student learning standards working groups are already underway for Foundation Programs, although their task is significantly different from developing student learning standards for degree programs and is discussed in Goal 8.
4 PROVIDER QUALITY AUDIT

4.1 Goal
A national system of independent audits of the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems of HEPs will be established to encourage the maintenance and advancement of those systems.

4.2 Background
Accreditation is only one of a number of means for providing external quality assurance. Other means include Assessment and Audit. Assessment is an evaluation which results in a grade (e.g. A, B, C; or from 1 to 4; or excellent-good-satisfactory-poor) based primarily on quantitative indicators. Although used in China and India, it is widely criticized as being unable to support “the dual purpose of quality improvement [and quality assurance], which is necessary in a developing context”.

A number of countries, including Australia (via AUQA), the United Kingdom (via the QAA) and New Zealand (via the NZUAU), operate a system of external quality audits of HEPs. The purpose of a quality audit is to verify the effectiveness of the processes a HEP has in place for achieving its goals and objectives.

This is a ‘fitness for purpose’ approach (it assumes that there are appropriate mechanisms in place for ensuring that the goals and objectives themselves are appropriate – this remains a challenge for Oman).

The current arrangements in Oman intend for some form of ‘follow-up’ of Accreditation processes (although this has not yet been developed). The Quality Audit model would be most useful for Oman in this regard.

In terms of the logistical process, Provider Quality Audit appears very similar to Provider Accreditation. Both involve a process of self review by the Provider, followed by independent review by an external Panel. However, the purpose, philosophy, method of analysis and outputs are very different. A brief comparison between Accreditation and Quality Audit is provided in Table 3. The output of a Quality Audit is a formative report commending those practices which are particularly good, and making recommendations in respect of those issues where there is opportunity for improvement. In most countries these reports are public, providing an incentive for HEPs to perform well, and reward for those that achieve commendations. It could be that Quality Audit reports in Oman are confidential for the first cycle until the sector gets used to them, although this should not be the preferred position.

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15 Marjorie Peace Lenn (February 2004), Strengthening World Bank Support for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education in East Asia and the Pacific, (p7)
Table 3. Brief Comparison of HEP Quality Audit and HEP Accreditation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Quality Audit</th>
<th>Provider Accreditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of External Review</td>
<td>To independently evaluate the effectiveness of the HEP’s quality assurance systems in order to help the HEP improve and thereby to give confidence to the sector.</td>
<td>To provide certified confidence to the public that the Provider has the capability and capacity to provide higher education of an appropriate quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of HEP</td>
<td>Determined by the totality of goals and requirements, set externally or internally, that are applicable to the HEP (i.e. the HEP’s own standards have a relevance in their own right).</td>
<td>Determined by national standards. HEP’s own standards are only relevant against the national standards (i.e. standards set by the HEP at a level higher than the national standards are irrelevant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Analysis</td>
<td>Formative evaluation (using ADRI).</td>
<td>Summative assessment of whether the HEP has satisfied or failed to satisfy the requirements for accreditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Output</td>
<td>A qualitative report (which may be public or private) outlining the effectiveness of the HEP’s quality assurance systems. It includes commendations of good practice and recommendations where improvements are required. There is no ranking, certification or pass/fail output.</td>
<td>A formally designated status. May also include a qualitative report commending particular areas of strength and particular areas where standards are not currently being met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Improvements are generated against the issues identified in the report. Good practices are celebrated and promoted.</td>
<td>A pass provides permission to provide higher education. Failure may result in probation or termination of the institution as a provider of higher education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To support the accreditation process with an effective national system of Provider Quality Audits.

It is proposed that all HEPs be subject to external quality audit on a regular cycle. The dual purposes of quality audit are:

- to provide an opportunity for HEPs to obtain independent feedback from external experts for quality improvement purposes; and
- to provide the public with assurance that the HEPs are participating in a rigorous and continuous process of quality assurance.

The Quality Audits would be conducted by the OAC. A proposed process for provider quality audit is set out in Appendix F. This will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support.

The intention is for HEP to alternate every three years between Provider Accreditation and Provider Quality Audit. In other words, Quality Audit not only provides a mechanism for following up on issues raised in the previous Provider Accreditation reports, but it also provides an opportunity to prepare for the next Provider Accreditation. Recognising that a cycle can be started at any point, and recognizing that most HEPs are currently unlikely to pass Provider Accreditation, it is suggested that the focus for the next three...
years be on implementing Quality Audits. The sector may then progress to Provider Accreditation processes.

Progress Report: The Board of the OAC has agreed in principle to Provider Quality Audits. Two pilot projects will take place in the first quarter of 2007 to test the system and refine the process and manual, which are currently under development.

(b) To, at government level, enter into mutual recognition arrangements with provider quality audit agencies of targeted countries.

HEPs in Oman may be subject not only to provider quality audit domestically, but also by agencies with quality audit jurisdiction over the affiliated institutions. For example, the QAA or AUQA may visit (and, in the case of QAA, have visited) HEPs in Oman as part of their process for auditing their own institutions. While the focus of these audits is on the foreign institution rather than the Omani partner, this still imposes a significant burden on the Omani HEPs, which could be alleviated.

Once Oman has its own credible provider quality audit process in place, it may negotiate mutual recognition agreements with agencies such as the QAA and AUQA whereby reports from the Omani audits are regarded as sufficient not only for Omani purposes but also for international purposes. This will strengthen the credibility of the Omani system and reduce the burden on Omani HEPs.

The priority would be to attain mutual recognition agreements with countries like the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, because with these agreements in place most other countries will automatically assume recognition. However, a shorter term strategy might be to aim for a number of agreements with Gulf nations in order to gain momentum.
5 PROVIDER LICENSING AND ACCREDITATION

5.1 Goal
A national system of provider licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides confidence to the public of the standing of Omani HEPs.

5.2 Background
The purposes of this Goal are well understood and have been a part of ROSQA from the beginning. Indeed, Provider Accreditation (called “Institutional Accreditation” in ROSQA) is one of the most developed aspects of the current system. Nonetheless, the Objectives below significantly advance the current arrangements. The most notable changes from ROSQA are:

- closer alignment of Licensing and Accreditation;
- implementation of a more comprehensive and updated set of standards (from Goal 2);
- explicit differentiation between those HEPs which are Agents only and those which are Agents and/or offer their own programs;
- advanced use of information technology for Review Panel processes; and
- provision for Appeal (covered in Goal 7).

5.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To revise the purpose and principles of Provider Accreditation (including all its stages).

At present the sector is not clear precisely what role and benefits Omani Provider Accreditation serves. The primary motivation for HEPs is that they want accreditation to make them more attractive when recruiting students and staff, although they can get this (in some cases) from international accreditation. The primary motivation for students is to attend a HEP of perceived quality that will strengthen their subsequent employment prospects. Again, this can be obtained (in some instances) from international accreditation. The primary motivation for Government is to ensure that HEPs are of appropriate quality. But what is Provider Accreditation and what would make Omani Provider Accreditation sufficiently relevant to encourage HEPs to comply?

Provider Accreditation is independent verification that a higher education institution has the general capability and capacity to deliver higher education programs to students in accordance with the requirements and strategic directions of the sector. This verification is based on an assessment of the institution against national standards (see Goal 1).

As such, Provider Accreditation is also a necessary precursor to Program Accreditation (see Goal 6).

Part of this objective involves resolving whether or not Provider Accreditation should be mandatory. At present, ROSQA assumes that Provider Accreditation is mandatory. However, the OAC currently lacks the means to give effect to this assumption. The position in this Quality Plan is that a system of Provider Accreditation, once fully implemented, ought to be compulsory. Public confidence in the higher education sector is of paramount importance. The Government, via the MoHE and the OAC, has a responsibility to ensure that students, their families and employers, and other
stakeholders, are protected from substandard education. The country is not only poorly served by such education, but it is, in fact, detrimental. Students will have spent time and money on a Provider which does not properly educate them; employers will recruit new staff who are ill-equipped to fulfill their work responsibilities; and the international credibility of Oman will be diminished.

The market-led argument says let a thousand flowers bloom and the bees take nectar from the flowers of their choice. In other words, any education is better than no education. This argument has been rejected in the higher education systems of most developed countries. Poor quality education can be counter productive, ruining a country’s reputation and therefore the international employability/mobility of its students. Ideally, every provider of higher education in Oman ought to be an accredited institution. In practice, it will be some time before this could be reasonably enforced.

The next five years, however, may need to be an amnesty period. Firstly, most institutions are simply not ready and will not become ready overnight. Secondly, the national system is not ready to handle that many accreditation applications and will not become ready overnight. The approach could be more positive, with five years of subsidized accreditation applications. A date should be set (say 2015 – see Appendix C) by which the mandatory nature of Provider Accreditation will be enforced. From that date, no non-accredited institution ought to be permitted to offer higher education programs.

(b) To revise and implement an effective Provider Licensing (‘Provisional Accreditation’) process.

ROSQA outlines three stages of approval prior to the Full Accreditation: Proposal; Conditional Approval and Licensing; and Provisional Accreditation and Renewal of Licensing. For the purposes of this Quality Plan they will be collectively referred to as Provider Licensing.

Other than the legalities involved in establishing a registered entity, the fundamental purposes of stages prior to full accreditation are the same as for full accreditation: i.e. to provide assurance that the institution has the capability and capacity to offer higher education at an acceptable quality. The fundamental difference is that Provider Licensing must rely on plans whereas full Provider Accreditation may rely on actual experience. It also involves the processes associated with registering a legal entity.

Therefore, the standards for Provisional Licensing and Provider Accreditation are mostly the same. It is proposed that the process for Provider Licensing be revised in accordance with the new Provider Standards (see Goal 2). The effective, efficient and consistent implementation of Provider Licensing will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support, including a secure and interactive web portal for Licensing Panels.

Provider Licensing is likely to continue to be the responsibility of the MoHE rather than the OAC. Because of this and its substantially different nature from all other forms of accreditation (in that there is no teaching of any sort prior to Provider Licensing) it is not envisaged that the process be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7) other than the usual remedies provided under law.

(c) To revise and implement an effective Provider Accreditation process.

A proposed revised process for Provider Accreditation is set out in Appendix H. The effective, efficient and consistent implementation of Provider Accreditation will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates;
External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support, including a secure and interactive web portal for Accreditation Panels.

ROSQA established a cycle whereby providers must be accredited every five years. As stated earlier (see Objective 4.3(a)) it is proposed that this be amended to a six year cycle with a Provider Quality Audit in between to ensure preparation for the forthcoming accreditation and follow-up from the previous accreditation (see Goal 4).

The formal accreditation classification of a HEP which passes this process is “Nationally Accredited Provider”; for a HEP Agent the classification would be “Nationally Accredited Agent”. The status would ordinarily apply for six years. A full list of provider accreditation classifications is listed in Appendix G.

The formal accreditation status of a HEP which fails this process is “Probationally Accredited Provider/Agent”. The HEP would progress to the Provider Probation process (see Objective 5.3(d)).

The Provider Accreditation process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7).

Unlike for Program Accreditation (see Goal 6), there are no plans at this stage to provide exemptions for HEPs from Provider Accreditation based on separately-sourced international accreditation. This is because the issues addressed by Provider Accreditation are closely interconnected with the culture and resources of Oman. However, there are discussions in the international QA community about increasing mutual recognition of all forms, and this will need to be monitored closely.

(d) To emphasise quality improvement over quality control by providing HEPs with a Probationary period in which to respond to failed Provider Accreditation applications.

It is to be expected, especially in the first five to ten years of this Plan being implemented, that not all applications for Provider Accreditation will pass. One option is to close those HEPs. However, a more constructive approach may be to place the HEPs under probation for one or two years (at the OAC’s discretion), providing them with time to remedy any issues found by the Review Panel.

While a HEP is under probation, irrespective of whether it was a Provisionally Accredited Provider seeking National Provider Accreditation or a Nationally Accredited Provider for which reaccreditation was being sought, its formal status is that of Probationally Accredited. It is necessary for this third status to be used (rather than, for example, retaining its previous status or defaulting to Provisionally Accredited) because of the different ramifications. Most notably, during this time the HEPs would not be permitted to enroll new students into any of its higher education programs. Not only is this a powerful incentive for them to try and meet the standards first time, but it also serves as a protection for students against enrolling with a HEP which may soon be shut down.

At the end of the probationary period, a new Provider Portfolio (i.e. the main element of a Provider Accreditation application) is prepared and a Review Panel convenes again to re-assess the HEP. This reassessment will focus particularly on the recommendations raised in the previous Accreditation Panel’s report, but may include consideration of any issue raised in the Provider Standards.

If the HEP passes this Probation assessment, then it is equivalent to receiving National Provider Accreditation. If Probationally Accredited HEPs fail their probationary assessment then their status changes to Accreditation Terminated and they may no longer offer any higher education programs. Such HEPs have twice failed to meet the standards (once through the Provider Accreditation application and then a second time through the Probation assessment). The MoHE and the OAC have a responsibility to
protect students and employers from poor quality Providers. Any students still with the HEP at the time of its accreditation being terminated must either be transferred to another HEP to complete their studies, or exit with a sub-degree qualification such as a diploma or associate degree (this decision would require the approval of the OAC).

The Provider Probation process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7).

A proposed process for Provider Probation is set out in Appendix I. This will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support.

(e) To implement appropriate certification of Provider Accreditation status.

All diploma and degree certificates, institutional advertising and the HEP’s website must bear the HEP’s accreditation status of the provider and institution. Failure to do accurately may result in penalties. These are yet to be determined, but may include a relegation of accreditation classification. This is to ensure that students and the public are accurately informed about the quality and status of Oman’s HEPs.

The classification system for Provider Accreditation status is provided in Appendix G.

(f) To ensure all higher education institutions are properly titled.

One possible outcome of Provider Accreditation would be the enforcement of compliance with Provider nomenclature (see Objective 1.3(a)). This may require amendments to Royal Decrees naming HEPs. Again, the purpose of this objective is to ensure that students and the public are accurately informed about the status of Oman’s HEPs. Inaccurate titling by a HEP, for example in promotional materials or on the website, may result in penalties yet to be determined but which may include a relegation of accreditation classification.

(g) To develop and maintain an online national register of accredited institutions.

Accreditation decisions ought to be readily available to the public. The OAC will have responsibility for maintaining an online database with the official titles and accreditation status of all HEPs. This database is also discussed in Objective 11.3(a).
6 PROGRAM LICENSING AND ACCREDITATION

6.1 Goal
A national system of higher education program licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides confidence to the public of the standing of higher education programs offered in Oman and facilitates student mobility.

6.2 Background
The purposes of this Goal are well understood and have been a part of ROSQA from the beginning. The Objectives below significantly advance the current arrangements for Program Accreditation. The most notable changes from ROSQA are:

- closer alignment of Licensing and Accreditation;
- basing Program Accreditation on Standards or Student Learning (see Goal 3);
- differentiating between Accrediting Omani qualifications and Recognising the accreditation of foreign programs; and
- providing for Appeals (see Goal 7)

Discussions have been held with other Gulf countries to establish a Gulf accreditation system. These discussions could be pursued with greater confidence once Oman has experience in managing its own robust system.

6.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To revise the purpose and principles of Program Accreditation (including all its stages).

What is the purpose of Program Accreditation? Chiefly, it is to provide confidence to the public that the quality of the educational experience (curriculum, teaching, assessment, resourcing and student learning outcomes) is of acceptable standard. The main test of ‘acceptable standard’ for higher education is whether or not graduates are able to transfer to an international university for further study with full credit transfer; while the main test of ‘acceptable standard’ for professional accreditation is whether or not graduates have the skills and competencies to become members of, and uphold the reputation of, the profession. In both cases, the principal method for determining accreditation is a process of peer review against an appropriate set of standards (although there may be also additional requirements).

At present the sector is not clear precisely what role and benefits Omani Program Accreditation serves. Evidence shows that the student market continues to prefer studying at universities abroad to studying at Oman private HEPs. Within those HEPs, there is doubt that the “brand” of an Oman-accredited program will be strong enough to attract students compared with internationally accredited programs.

Potential advantages for HEPs having Omani accreditation of its programs include the following:

- decreased dependence on foreign partner HEPs;

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• greater flexibility in curriculum design;
• kudos (and marketing leverage) arising from National Accreditation;
• ability to promote any applicable mutual recognition agreements to students.

It will be necessary to phase in the Omani brand over a period of time, and to support the strength of the brand through a combination of formal mutual recognition agreements with benchmark countries and public promotional campaigns.

In time it may be appropriate to make Omani Program Accreditation a condition for continued public financial support such as capital loans or internal scholarships. However, it is unreasonable to use this strategy at a time when they will not directly assist with the attractiveness of the brand to students.

(b) To revise and implement an effective process for Program Licensing (also known as Provisional Program Accreditation or Program Approval) against national standards prior to those programs being delivered.

All proposed higher education programs ought to be subject to an external approval process to ensure that they are likely to be of appropriate quality. This process is known by a number of terms: Provisional Program Accreditation, Program Licensing or Program Approval. For the sake of consistency in this Plan, the term Program Licensing will be used.

Programs that have not yet been offered can only be Licensed (i.e. approved on the basis of Provider Accreditation, curriculum, plans and committed resources). As the program has not yet been offered, it is not possible to provide the final verification (i.e. Full Program Accreditation – see Objective 6.3(c)) because such verification requires consideration of student learning outcomes, employer feedback and other experiential evidence.

Once the Provider Accreditation system is fully implemented (see Goal 5) this will become a prerequisite for Program Licensing. However, it is impractical to defer all new Program Licenses until that time.

Students enrolled in programs that are licensed, but not accredited, must be made aware of their legal rights and responsibilities. These rights and responsibilities should specifically preclude the right to sue a HEP (or the Government) if a subsequent full accreditation application fails, provided that the students were made fully aware that the program was not already fully accredited.

A proposed process for Program Licensing is set out in Appendix K. It involves a self study prepared by the HEP, against the appropriate OAC Student Learning Standards, and then consideration of that self study by a panel of External Reviewers. This will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support.

Once a program has passed this process its formal status is Licensed (also known as “Provisionally Accredited”). The full set of program classifications is provided in Appendix J.

The Program Licensing process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7).
(c) To revise and implement an effective process for fully accrediting higher education programs against national standards after the first cohort of students has graduated.

Once its first cohort of students had graduated, a program must be submitted for full accreditation. It is necessary for some students to have completed the program and entered into the workforce (or further studies) in order for the OAC to make a full assessment of the program.

A proposed process for program accreditation is set out in Appendix L. It involves a self study prepared by the HEP, against the appropriate OAC Student Learning Standards, and then consideration of that self study by a panel of External Reviewers. The effective, efficient and consistent implementation of Program Accreditation will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; External Review panels; dedicated support staff and customized technological support.

As per the provisions in ROSQA, Major changes to a program will need to be subject to the program accreditation process, while Minor changes will require only approval by the MoHE and pro forma notification to the OAC.

Once a program has passed this process its formal status is Nationally Accredited Program. The formal accreditation status of a program which fails this process is Probationally Accredited Program. It progresses to the Program Probation process (see Objective 6.3(d)). The Program Accreditation process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7).

There are two main ‘schedules’ by which Program Accreditation can be managed. One is for the OAC to respond to individual applications. This is expensive and time consuming, and Panels need to be convened for each case. But it has the advantage of being flexible for the HEPs. This option is used by, for example, the State accrediting agencies in Australia. A second option is to establish a national schedule whereby any programs that are encompassed by a specific set of Standards for Student Learning (see Goal 3) are considered in any given year. The advantages are than a single Panel can be used to accredit all comparable programs in a single exercise, thereby generating efficiencies and greater standardization of decision making. The disadvantage is that some HEPs may find this inflexible. This option has been used by, for example, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in South Africa, which accredited all MBA programs in a single exercise. The sector is invited to make submissions on which of these two options it prefers.

(d) To emphasise quality improvement over quality control by providing HEPs with a Probationary period in which to respond to failed accreditation applications.

It is to be expected, especially in the first five to ten years of this Quality Plan being implemented, that not all applications for Program Accreditation will pass. One option is to close those programs. However, a more constructive approach may be to place the program under probation for one or two years (at the OAC’s discretion), providing the HEPs with time to remedy any issues found by the Review Panel.

While a program is under probation, irrespective of whether it was a Licensed Program seeking full accreditation or a Nationally Accredited Program for which reaccreditation was being sought, its formal status is that of Probationally Accredited. It is necessary for this third status to be used (rather than, for example, retaining its previous status or defaulting to Provisionally Accredited) because of the different ramifications. Most notably, during this time the HEPs would not be permitted to enroll new students into the program. Not only is this a powerful incentive for them to try and meet the standards

first time, but it also serves as a protection for students against enrolling in a program which may soon be shut down.

At the end of the probationary period, a new Program Portfolio is prepared and a Review Panel convenes again to re-assess the program. This reassessment will focus particularly on the recommendations raised in the previous Accreditation Panel’s report, but may include consideration of any issue raised in the Student Learning Standards. If the program passes, then it is equivalent to receiving National Program Accreditation.

If a Probationally Accredited program fails its probationary assessment then its status changes to Accreditation Terminated and the HEP may no longer offer the program. These programs have twice failed to meet the standards (once through the Program Accreditation application and then a second time through the Probation assessment). The MoHE and the OAC have a responsibility to protect students and employers from poor quality programs. Any students still in the program at the time of its accreditation being terminated must either be transferred to another HEP to complete their studies, or exit with a sub-degree qualification such as a diploma or associate degree (this decision would require the approval of the OAC).

The ROSQA document already states: “where accreditation is revoked for a given programme, by authority of the Minister, the institution must cease to offer that programme and must make arrangements at its own expense for the students to transfer to an appropriate programme either within the institution or elsewhere” (Executive Summary, p8).

A proposed process for Program Probation is set out in Appendix M. The effective, efficient and consistent implementation of Program Accreditation will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; dedicated support staff and customized technological support.

The Program Probation process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7).

(e) To develop a system for exempting foreign accredited programs offered by Omani HEPs from Omani Program Accreditation based upon satisfactory foreign quality assurance arrangements.

The national program accreditation system permits (indeed, encourages) and needs processes to recognize effective international accreditation where appropriate. The current private higher education system has been designed on the proviso that programs offered are internationally accredited. This was a very sensible way of rapidly introducing higher education programs into the country. ROSQA appropriately states that “where an institution in Oman offers programmes in partnership with an overseas university and the awards conferred are those of the overseas university, the award title of the overseas university may be used, provided that the overseas university’s regulations for degrees do not fall below the requirements described in the Oman Qualifications Framework” (section 4iii, Executive Summary, p6). However, it does not differentiate in its method between accrediting home-grown degrees and degrees offered by other accredited HEPs.

Higher education programs accredited by foreign accreditation authorities and offered by Omani HEPs ought to be exempt from Omani Program Accreditation. There are a number of philosophical and pragmatic reasons for this.

The intellectual property ownership rights of a program owned by a foreign institution and accredited by another jurisdiction should be respected (but see also Objective 1.3(h)), as should the jurisdiction of the foreign EQA. An Omani HEP ought not to pass the program off as its own, unless the foreign partner expressly approves this transfer of
rights and relinquishes its own accreditation of the program in Oman. In that case, the program is subject to Oman’s Program Accreditation process (see Objective 6.3(c)).

If the Omani HEP has made minor amendments to the program then this does not affect the accreditation status of the program. If the Omani HEP has made major amendments to the program and wishes to offer it as its own program, then the program is subject to Oman’s Program Accreditation process (see Objective 6.3(c)).

There can be standards problems with having programs accredited by two valid jurisdictions. Sometimes the standards of Oman and the standards of the other country may be mutually exclusive in parts. This can create unhelpful problems for the HEP (there are international precedents – in the Gulf region – for this dilemma).

There are also consequential problems with having programs accredited by two valid jurisdictions. Specifically, it can give rise to the prospect of two separate qualifications being awarded for a single program of study. This is one of the insidious examples of ‘qualification multiplication’, by which students end up with apparently far more qualifications than the study they actually undertook, thereby potentially misleading employers (see Objective 1.3(i)).

Lastly, the Guiding Principles (p11) state that systems must seek to reduce the administrative burden on the sector where possible. If a program is already subject to adequate quality assurance processes, then there is doubtful value in subjecting it to further processes. Allowing recognition of foreign accreditation will also ease the burden on the OAC and enable recognitions to be processed more quickly.

All that said, it is also unwise to allow the sector to offer foreign programs without any checks in place. ‘Degree mills’ whereby students simply pay for an ostensibly genuine qualification certificate are growing rapidly and there are many examples of programs which, although they do require submission of assessed work by the student, fall well below standards that would be acceptable to Oman.

At present, Oman has no robust method for determining the effectiveness of systems whereby affiliate institutions maintain equivalent standards for their programs offered in Oman. A proposed process for Program Recognition is set out in Appendix N. It is intended to be a lighter process than full Program Accreditation, provided that the necessary standards for recognition are met. In order for a foreign program to be recognised it must have the following features:

• the Omani HEP is an Accredited Agent HEP (see Goal 5.3(c));

• the program is accredited in a manner recognised by the State in its country of origin;

• the foreign HEP is accredited in a manner recognised by the State in its country of origin;

• the foreign HEP provides an affidavit that the quality of the program (in the most inclusive sense) in Oman is equivalent to the quality of the program in its country of origin (if the program is not offered in the country of origin then it cannot be Recognised using this process); and

• the country of origin has a credible external quality assurance mechanism that encompasses the transnational delivery of the program in its scope, and has considered the foreign HEP’s mechanisms for giving effect to the above affidavit and has found them satisfactory.
If these conditions are met, then the programs accredited status may be formally recognised in Oman without being subject to a separate review process. Once a program has passed this process its formal status is Recognised Program. This is, for all practical purposes, equivalent to a NationallyAccredited Program.

The Program Recognition process may be subject to formal appeal (see Goal 7). However, decisions made by other States are outside the jurisdiction of the Omani Appeals system.

(f) To develop and implement criteria for recognizing international external quality assurance agencies which facilitate effective quality assurance of transnational programs.

In order for Objective 6.3(e) to be implemented effectively, there must be a means for determining whether the quality assurance arrangements of foreign countries are credible and effective generally and in relation to their transnational activities in particular. Worldwide experience has shown that the processes for ensuring the equivalence of program quality and, most importantly, student learning outcomes between home campus and offshore offerings are not necessarily effective. There are too many important elements of the educational learning environment that differ, such as contextual interpretation of course content, staffing quality, library resources, availability of student learning support systems and students’ prior learning pedagogies. For this reason, quality assurance agencies such as the QAA and AUQA conduct audits of transnational programs.

Indeed, the term ‘international accreditation’ is somewhat misleading. It implies that the accreditation has a status that is universally recognised. In a very small number of cases this may be true. There are credible international accrediting bodies, such as EQUIS18 and ABET19, which apply accreditation standards consistently around the world. However, in the majority of cases the legitimacy of the accreditation is limited to the scope of a specific institutional, national or institutional jurisdiction only. Those jurisdictions do not necessarily have robust means for ensuring that the scope of their accreditation processes extend to adequately encompass transnational activities. International external quality agencies like AUQA and the QAA have responded to this concern by establishing rigorous offshore quality audits.

A database will be developed that contains an assessment of foreign EQAs and HEPs based on criteria to determine whether or not they are sufficiently credible for their reports to be accepted for the purposes of Program Recognition (Objective 6.3(e)). The criteria also need to be developed. Some preliminary ideas follow.

The EQA must, at least, be members of INQAAHE. The scope of their mandate must include a thorough evaluation of HEP transnational activities in design and in practice. They must ostensibly comply with the Guidelines for Good Practice.

Some countries allow certain HEPs to be self-accrediting institutions (SAIs). This means that the SAI may establish its own higher education programs and promote them as being fully accredited without requiring any external approval. ‘Accreditation’ by SAIs will not ordinarily suffice for Recognition purposes, unless that SAI is also subject to an EQA process. An example of this is Australia, where Universities are authorised by the State to accredit their own degree programs, but this self-accreditation is subject to audit by AUQA.

18 See http://www.efmd.org/equis/
19 See http://www.abet.org/
Entry into the Register will require sign-off by both the Board and the EQA itself. This is because EQAs may not wish to be bound by the responsibility of ensuring that their accreditation processes will continue to adequately incorporate consideration of activities in Oman. For that reason also, entry into the Register will be for a limited, renewable term.

(g) To implement appropriate certification of program accreditation status.

HEPs wish, properly, to gain marketing advantages from having their programs accredited. Students, their families and employers of graduates wish to have tangible evidence of the quality of programs. This will be evidenced by way of formal certification of the accreditation status of a program. There will be five aspects to this certification.

Firstly, a publicly accessible, online database of all accredited programs will be maintained by the OAC (see Objective 11.3(a)).

Secondly, a formal certificate will be issued to the HEP from the OAC (or, in the case of Program Licensing, the MoHE if that is where the responsibility is allocated). This certificate will bear a unique program accreditation number. This number will facilitate searching for information about the Program’s accreditation status on a website database.

Thirdly, the HEP will be provided with artwork, wording and the unique number pertaining to the program’s accredited status which must be used in all public materials pertaining to that program (such as recruitment brochures, prospecti, posters etc.) as well as students’ academic transcripts.

Fourthly, the requirement for the MoHE to attest the certificates issued to students should be abandoned for accredited programs. This is a hugely burdensome bureaucratic requirement that adds little value. HEPs ought to provide their own certificates, and submit a list of graduates to the MoHE (so that employers of graduates or HEPs accepting students into further studies may check the validity of certificates presented by graduates). In the event that falsified certificates come to light, and it can be established that this was done by the HEP, then the MoHE should have the ability to impose severe penalties on the HEP.

Lastly, the accreditation status will specify the primary language of tuition and this detail will be included in the above four instances. It will not follow that subsequent offering of that program in a different language will constitute an accredited offering.
7 APPEALS

7.1 Goal

The quality management system will be regarded as fair and credible by being supported with a professional appeals process that meets international standards.

7.2 Background

The purpose of appeal is to ensure that all stakeholders can have the utmost confidence in the professionalism and impartiality of the decision making process. Appeals processes reduce the chance for miscarriages of justice and subsequent legal action. They also ensure greater international credibility leading to increased opportunities for mutual recognition.

The INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice (#8) ask for EQAs to have an appeals process against their decisions. At present, ROSQA does not provide for any formal process of appealing decisions made by the MoHE (for Licensing) or by the OAC (for Accreditation). In the absence of a formal appeals process, there is temptation for appellants to invoke ad hoc processes which may be neither professional nor impartial.

For Oman, it is proposed that a formal appeals process be established that could be invoked for any of the following decisions:

- Provider Quality Audit reports (see Objective 4.3(a))
- Provider Accreditation and reaccreditation (see Objective 5.3(c))
- Provider probation (see Objective 5.3(c))
- Program Licensing (see Objective 6.3(b)).
- Program Accreditation and reaccreditation (see Objective 6.3(c))
- Program Probation (see Objective 6.3(d))
- Program Recognition (see Objective 6.3(e))

It is not envisaged that the appeals process would apply to Provider Licensing decisions given the different political and strategic nature of that process. Legal processes would apply in that instance.

If a formal teacher registration process is implemented (see Objective 10.3(c)) then there may be a requirement for it to be subject to an appeals process. However, that possibility is not addressed in this section.

7.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To develop and implement an Appeals policy for all accreditation processes and quality audits that will be regarded as fair, robust and final.

Ideally, a well developed system with an independent, fair and transparent appeals process would eliminate recourse to further legal processes. Specific policy issues to address include the following:

- The grounds for appeal. There are many models for this in legal systems which may be considered as benchmarks, but the most appropriate in this instance may be to
permit appeals only on the basis that the guiding standards, policies and processes were not correctly followed by the Review Panel in reaching its reported conclusions or by the OAC in approving the report. Appeal applications based on dissatisfaction with a decision, but failing to make a *prima facie* case that policies, standards and processes were incorrectly followed, should not be permissible.

- Ensuring that the costs of appeals are shared appropriately between the parties in a manner not unreasonably prejudicial against successful applicants. Direct costs to the OAC of appeals that are upheld ought to be fully funded by the OAC. Direct costs to the OAC of appeals that are overruled should be charged to the appellant.

- Limiting claims for damages. Without precluding appellants’ rights under law, appellants should not be entitled to claim damages against the OAC for appeals that are upheld unless it can be clearly found that the OAC did not act in good faith.

It is the responsibility of the OAC to establish the Appeals Policy. Submissions are welcomed from the sector.

(b) *To develop and implement an Appeals process to support the Appeals policy.*

A proposed process for appeals is set out in Appendix O. This will require the development of a comprehensive manual; training modules; work process templates; dedicated support staff and customized technological support. In summary, it is proposed that:

- Given that the appeal is against a decision of the OAC Board, the appeal will be made to H.E. the Minister of Higher Education.

- The H.E. Undersecretary of Higher Education chairs all Appeals.

- The Appeals Committee includes H.E. the Undersecretary plus two members from the External Reviewers register who were not involved in the project under appeal, and who have no conflict of interest.

- The Appeals Committee is *ad hoc* (i.e. the membership will change for each new appeal).

- The appellant will prepare an appeals application, which must meet certain criteria (as discussed in Objective 7.3(a)).

- A professional staff member from the OAC, who was not involved in the project under appeal, will provide executive support to the Appeals Committee.

It is the responsibility of the MoHE to establish the Appeals process. Submissions are welcomed from the sector.

(c) *To consider establishing an independent Student Ombudsman to deal with complaints from students.*

One consequence of a regulatory environment in which an EQA (Governmental or otherwise) holds itself out as providing credible quality assurance of a provider is that the EQA should be held accountable. The Appeals process outlined in this Goal is only available to HEPs seeking to appeal against audit or accreditation processes. However, there are other stakeholders who may wish to pursue a grievance – most notably, students. The Appeals process outlined in this Goal is not a suitable mechanism for addressing student concerns.

HEPs ought to have their own processes for handling student complaints. However, there will be instances in which students wish to take their complaint beyond the jurisdiction of the HEP. This will particularly apply if the students believe that an HEP’s complaints handling process is flawed.
The law court is one external mechanism for addressing student complaints. However, this is highly formal, expensive and adversarial. There are other mechanisms which could be considered. These include processes of mediation and arbitration as well as adjudication. It can be difficult for courts to invoke these processes. An alternative is to establish a national Student Ombudsman, with statutory authority (by way of Royal Decree) to resolve student complaints using these processes.20

For private HEPs, the Ministry of Higher Education has been assuming some of this responsibility during its supervisory visits. However, this has been arbitrary in terms of timing.

20 There are many examples of industry-specific Ombudsmen in Australia and New Zealand. Professor Virginnia Goldblat at Massey University, New Zealand, is an expert in this field and may be a useful contact.
8 FOUNDATION PROGRAM QUALITY ASSURANCE

8.1 Goal
A national system of Foundation Program reviews will be established, which helps ensure that those programs adequately prepare students for their higher education studies.

8.2 Background
The purpose of this goal is to ensure that students are adequately prepared for their higher education studies. The objectives of this Goal could have been incorporated directly into other goals (notably Goals 3 and 6). However, because it represents a significantly new development it has been treated separately under this Goal to facilitate dedicated discussion.

The MoHE reported\(^{21}\) that in the 2003-2004 academic year one third (3347) of all students at private colleges and universities were enrolled in Foundation Programs. The draft Strategic Plan for Education includes Recommendation S10 which states: “that the reform of School Education be structured to enhance student outcomes, to ensure that student competencies are fit for purpose and to gradually eliminate the need for Foundation Studies in Higher Education,” (p79). A target date of 2020 is set for this goal. This means that, for at least 14 years, Foundation Programs will continue to be an important pathway into higher education. International comparisons show that, even with a robust secondary education system in place, the need for Foundation Programs is likely to continue indefinitely for other student cohorts such as international students, mature students or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may not have had access to effective secondary schooling.

Foundation Programs are not typically regarded as higher education. They are specifically located below higher education on most national quality frameworks and their successful completion does not earn students credit towards a higher education award. For this reason, they are typically excluded from national higher education quality management systems. The ROSQA specifically excludes Foundation Programs (Executive Summary, p4).

The problem with that exclusion is that Foundation programs are left in a vacuum, as they are usually not included in secondary or other post secondary quality management systems either. This is particularly significant for Oman because of the vital role Foundation Programs play in the overall education system. Experience has shown that students are entering into higher education with a lower standard of capability than desirable. The prospect of the students attaining, upon graduation, learning outcomes recognized as equivalent to that of other countries is a challenge indeed. To that end, most colleges and universities offer Foundation Programs designed to raise the academic capabilities of students prior to their formal entrance into higher education studies.

At present, there is no mechanism for independently assessing the quality of those programs. Addressing this gap could be a matter of priority, as it is a precursor for many students in their educational progress. The creation of an effective academic progression from post basic schooling to higher education is crucial. Student success in higher education is heavily influenced by the effectiveness with which secondary schools

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prepare them for those higher studies. This issue is addressed in the draft *Strategic Plan for Education* (especially Recommendation S9) and its importance is stressed here. In developing effective Foundation Program standards and review systems, it will be necessary to discuss academic entrance standards for higher education with the Ministry of Education.

8.3 **Objectives and Strategies**

(a) **To develop standards for Foundation Programs that will ensure the programs adequately prepare students for higher education.**

Not all Foundation Programs are the same. For example, some Colleges may wish to prepare students more for science-based degree programs, while others may focus more on management or social sciences; most will require appropriate English language proficiency, but others will teach higher education programs in Arabic. However, there is enough in common for Foundation Program standards to be set as a single exercise. All will have a focus on, at least:

- English language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking);
- higher learning skills (emphasizing, for example, critical enquiry, problem-solving and solution-finding abilities);
- information literacy skills (including basic research and library skills);
- computing literacy skills;
- numeracy/mathematical skills.

It is proposed that a committee be established to prepare a set of standards against which all Foundation Programs in Oman should be accredited. The main focus of the standards will be on the learning outcomes of the students and also include any resource standards particular to the effective delivery of the program. They will be at a higher (i.e. more conceptual) level than curriculum. It will remain the prerogative of HEPs to prepare their own curriculum, and it is to be expected that curricula will vary depending on the specific higher education offerings of each HEP.

The committee would ideally be chaired by a senior Omani academic and include up to two other academics from Oman HEPs and three senior academics from reputable countries. All would be required to have expertise in the design and delivery and review of Foundation Programs, and at least two ought to be recognized for their expertise in pedagogic research.

The committee would be reconvened every three years to review and revise the standards in line with national and international developments.

**Progress Report:** The MoHE, OAC and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) have collaborated to organise a National Foundation Program Symposium, to be held at SQU on 16–17 January 2006. The organising Committee is chaired by Dr Khamis Al Belushi of the MoHE.

The Academic Subcommittee is chaired by Dr Rahma Al-Mahrouqi of SQU. It’s task is to prepare draft Foundation Program standards for consultation at the symposium. It has convened four working groups to prepare these standards. These working groups include representatives from the public and private HEPs, MoHE and OAC as well as international experts.
The draft standards will be posted on the OAC website before the symposium, and will be discussed at the symposium. Final standards will be prepared after the symposium in light of the feedback received.

(b) To develop and implement a national process for externally reviewing Foundation Programs.

It is proposed that all Foundation Programs be subject to a form of external review to provide the public with independent assurance of the quality of the programs. This will be similar to a process of external Program Accreditation (see Goal 6). However, there are some differences.

Firstly, all Foundation Programs in Oman could be reviewed in a single process and by a single review panel. If work on the Foundation Program standards proceeds as planned, then final standards may be ready by March or April 2007. Allowing HEPs time to adapt their programs to these new standards, a national review project could take place in the first half of 2008 (or even late in 2007). As there may be well over 20 Foundation Programs in the country, this will be a major exercise. One option for managing this is to involve a large Panel of, say, 12 members which may then separate into six pairs for the purpose of institutional visits. The advantages of considering all Foundation Programs for accreditation in a single process are:

- most Foundation Programs already exist;
- a common project will enable greater consistency in judgement by the Panel;
- a single process will be substantially more cost effective than convening Panels for individual processes.

Secondly, unlike Higher Education programs, it would not be necessary to require institutions to have Provider Accreditation prior to having the Foundation Programs accredited (indeed, if the time frame of this Plan is followed then Provider Accreditations are unlikely to be formally in place for five years).

A third difference pertains to consequences of failing the review. If a HEP fails to earn accreditation for a higher education program after probation, then it will be required to terminate that program. It is proposed that this should not apply to Foundation Programs. Firstly, risks to students in undertaking a non-accredited Foundation Program are less significant than risks in undertaking a higher education program that has failed accreditation. This is because the Foundation Program student still has several subsequent years of study in which to reach acceptable student learning outcomes, whereas the graduate is expected to be ready for the workforce. Secondly, removing a Foundation Program from a College, even one not fully up to standard, may be counterproductive for the students. As such, it is proposed that this review system be a Foundation Program Audit rather than a Foundation Program Accreditation. A HEP which fails to obtain accreditation for their Foundation Program would still be permitted to offer the program, but would have it subject to closer scrutiny by the Ministry of Higher Education.

Progress Report: This matter will be the subject of a keynote address at the National Foundation Programs Symposium in Muscat on 16-17 January 2006. The symposium will include opportunity for participants to discuss the proposal and provide their input.
9 RESEARCH TRAINING QUALITY ASSURANCE

9.1 Goal

The quality management system will ensure that higher education plays a leading role in developing national research capacity and capability.

9.2 Background

The objectives of this Goal could have been incorporate directly into other goals (notably Goals 1 and 6). However, because it represents a significantly new development it has been treated separately under this Goal to facilitate dedicated discussion.

This Goal assumes, somewhat controversially, that high quality higher education is inexorably linked with research and that higher education and research are mutually beneficial. The MoHE notes that all private HEPs are “expected to have a research strategy” but concluded that “it is likely that Review Panels formed by the Accreditation Board will find that none of the Private University Colleges or the Private University meets these requirements to date”.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said recently approved a project to establish a national Research Council responsible for funding major research projects. The purpose of this goal is to assist the Research Council by recognizing that higher education plays a fundamental role in the development of national research capability and capacity through both research and research training.

The Research Council may believe that it should address some or all of the Objectives in this Goal rather than the MoHE or the OAC. An opportunity should be found to discuss this possibility and potential for collaboration between the interested parties.

9.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To develop, maintain and disseminate research methods courses as required components of Omani degree programs.

This Objective more properly resides in Goal 3. It has been treated separately here in order to facilitate discussion specifically about the inclusion of research training in the national quality management system for Omani higher education.

The proposal is to establish two research methods courses, one undergraduate and the other postgraduate, each of which include both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The purpose is to introduce students to research methods at an early stage and to start engendering a sense of critical inquiry. All Bachelor’s degree programs would be expected to include the undergraduate research methods course, and all Master’s degree programs would be expected to include the postgraduate research methods course.


23 Postgraduate study which involves the development of research skills by the student and the undertaking of an independent research project (usually resulting in a dissertation or similar level of output) under the supervision of appropriately qualified and experienced academic staff is known as ‘research training’.
A taskforce will be convened chaired by an appropriately experienced Omani academic and supported by an expert consultant who will act as Executive Officer. The taskforce membership must incorporate the following:

- pedagogic expertise;
- research experience;
- academics form the Arts, Sciences and Social Sciences; and
- national and international perspectives.

HEPs would be permitted to offer their own research methods courses *in lieu* of the national courses if they were demonstrably of an equivalent or higher standard. This determination would be made by the Program Accreditation Review Panels. Also, nothing in this Objective would prevent an HEP from offering research training above and beyond the compulsory courses.

(b) *To develop, maintain and disseminate standards for the recognition of national and international scholarly outputs and creative works.*

As with higher education, the development of a quality system for research requires some infrastructural components. One is the development of standards for recognizing quality research outputs. The purpose of this Objective (and the next one) is to encourage publication in international, refereed journals, books and monographs and similar research output fora by raising awareness of what constitutes appropriate publishing standards. The standards would encompass a range of outputs such as creative works not easily addressed via traditional research output methods (like musical composition, musical and theatrical performance and art exhibitions).

The development of standards would assist publishers, researchers, HEPs and accreditation bodies. Once they are approved they could be the subject of a training module for HEPs (see Objective 12.3(b)).

(c) *To develop and implement a process for accrediting research output publications.*

It is advantageous to the international reputation of Omani higher education generally for research outputs to be published in fora recognised as meeting international standards. There has been a growth in the number of Omani-based journals, but there has been no formal system for verifying whether these publications meet international standards (such as double blind refereeing) for publishing research output.

A process could be established, based on the OAC’s emerging expertise in accreditation, for verifying that a given publication meets appropriate standards (set in Objective 9.3(b)). Many countries have models which could assist with the implementation of this Objective.

(d) *To develop and maintain a standards-based research outputs database.*

Benchmark countries have HEP and national research output databases which enable the monitoring of research activity against set goals, and help inform the allocation of funding to future research efforts. The quantity of research output in Oman is too low to justify a dispersed model of research output monitoring. A national system would be more efficient and effective. Other advantages of such a database include helping demonstrate success in Omani higher education and strengthening the nexus between teaching and research by making Omani research outputs more readily available.

It is proposed that the OAC establish this database because the data would come from the accreditation process in Objective 9.3(c).
10 TEACHING QUALITY ASSURANCE

10.1 Goal

The quality of higher education teaching in Oman will, in the interests of providing the best possible education to students, rise to a level comparable with benchmark countries.

10.2 Background

The draft Strategic Plan for Education recognises the importance of high quality teaching and makes recommendations in relation to the recruitment, mentoring, training and evaluation of instructional staff (pp97-105). The main focus of these recommendations is on improving the quality of teaching at the basic and post basic levels to ensure that students are well prepared for higher studies or other endeavors after post basic schooling.

It is equally important that higher education teaching staff recognise that they have two professions: their disciplinary speciality and their role as teachers of higher education. The purpose of this goal is to focus attention on this issue.

10.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To develop principles for good quality higher education teaching.

In 1954, Benjamin Bloom\(^{24}\) proposed a taxonomy of learning comprising the following:

- Knowledge (involving straight recognition or recall)
- Comprehension (where relationships between pieces of information are recognized; where the context of knowledge can be described)
- Application (where knowledge can be used in a new setting)
- Analysis (where complex problems can be broken down into components which can be worked on)
- Synthesis (involving the creation of a final product, whether that is a work of art, a research plan, the design for a new factory etc.)
- Evaluation (where judgements about appropriateness and quality are involved)

In 1990, the equally eminent scholar Ernst Boyer\(^{25}\) proposed a revised classification of scholarship comprising the following:

- the scholarship of discovery, which contributes to the stock of human knowledge
- the scholarship of integration, which makes connections across disciplines and contexts and interprets findings in a more comprehensive understanding
- the scholarship of application, in which theory and practice come together in scholarly service
- and the scholarship of teaching, which requires the highest form of understanding.


\(^{25}\) Boyer, E.L. (1990), Scholarship reconsidered: priorities of the professoriate, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
For years, models of good teaching practice have been developed internationally based upon these conceptualizations of learning. There are many different pedagogies (many of which have much in common). Each suits certain programs of study and not others. Such pedagogies include (and are by no means limited to) rote learning; problem-based learning; student-centred learning; industry-based learning; experiential learning etc.

Oman is transitioning from a history in which rote learning/memorisation was the dominant pedagogy, to one where critical enquiry, problem solving skills and a commitment to lifelong learning are emphasised. The draft Strategic Plan for Education notes that “although some improvements have occurred in delivery methods, resulting in more effective and flexible delivery, traditional methods still predominate in many of Oman's higher education institutions” (p15).

It cannot be assumed that teaching staff in HEPs will readily recognise the precise implications of this shift for their teaching practice. It would be appropriate to set up an ad hoc Working Group to establish principles for what will constitute good teaching practice in Omani higher education. These principles can then be circulated and discussed in the sector to raise awareness and give impetus to appropriate professional development activities.

(b) To develop and provide a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching.

Much professional development for academic staff is continuous and based within the workplace (i.e. the HEPs). It typically comprises departmental seminars; in-house training programs; attendance at professional conferences and institutional working groups on particular educational policy matters. These are essential components of a learning culture. However, there is also scope for more formal teaching qualifications.

Countries such as New Zealand and Australia have had formal higher education teacher training programs in place for over a decade. These are typically provided by the HEPs themselves. They may provide benchmarks of formal qualifications which may be used in Oman.

The proposal is to offer a Graduate Certificate of Higher Education Teaching (GCHE) in Oman to teachers within public and private HEPs. The GCHE would be imported from a current credible provider in order to ensure that new pedagogical theories and practices are being introduced to the Omani sector. The program may be administered from within one of the current Omani HEPs (such as SQU or a College of Education), and could be offered using a combination of face to face and online delivery methods. For the first three years it would be offered as a Recognised program (see Objective 6.3(e)), but in time the intellectual property could be transferred to the local host institution and it may be accredited as an Omani qualification.

Deans and the MoHE may wish to consider phasing in the attainment of the GCHE as a requirement for promotion to specific levels (such as Associate Professor).

In order to guarantee the success of this objective, and to support the national strategy of Omanisation, the Government may wish to consider fully subsidizing the costs of this program for Omani academic staff.

Progress Report: A formal proposal is currently being developed in conjunction with Monash University.

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26 Professor Graham Webb, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality) at Monash University, Australia, has established a Graduate Certificate of Higher Education which has been implemented at universities in New Zealand and Australia. Professor Webb may be a useful contact.

To develop a Higher Education Teacher Registration system.

Many countries operate teacher registration boards for the primary and secondary schooling systems. The role of these boards is to set teacher standards and to certify that individual teachers meet these standards and are suitable for employment. In some countries, teacher registration is a legal requirement for employment in schools.

These teacher registration boards are very similar to other professional bodies which require people to meet certain standards of qualification, experience and ongoing professional development before they may be registered. Common examples include the Law Bar, professional associations of engineers and medical associations. The primary difference is that teacher registration tends to be a governmental responsibility rather than a professional body responsibility because of the important governments place on education and the extent of public funding or governmental control exerted on educational systems.

It is rare for professional accreditation to be required for teachers of higher education. There reasons for this are complex and historical. In developed higher education systems, where academic staff typically have PhDs and tutoring experience from highly reputable universities, the argument in favour of registration has been difficult to raise to the top of the priorities for further higher education system development. There are professional associations for university staff that purport to set standards. For example, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)\(^\text{28}\) states: “AAUP’s purpose is to advance academic freedom and shared governance, to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education, and to ensure higher education’s contribution to the common good”. However, these standards do not extend to being criteria against which staff are accredited for membership. Academic staff associations tend to be more industrial bargaining unions or political lobby groups.

For countries with a developing higher education system it can be difficult to attract high quality staff with advanced qualifications, pedagogically-informed teaching experience, and suitable proficiency in the language of instruction. It is even more difficult to find these staff who also have research-led curriculum and instructional design competencies. In such a context the potential benefits of a teacher registration system become more obvious. It may be worth exploring the Objective.

\(^{28}\) See [http://www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org).
11 NATIONAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

11.1 Goal
National data sets and other information will be collected, analysed and, where appropriate, made public to monitor progress with the Quality Plan and to facilitate benchmarking and student choice.

11.2 Background
At present there is a dearth of national data relating to quality of higher education. Such information is necessary in order to monitor progress implementing the Quality Plan. It is also useful to HEPs who wish to benchmark their performance against the rest of the sector.

Care must be taken to ensure that efficient use is made of data collected from providers and that multiple reporting is kept to a minimum. This is to reduce the burden on the sector, increase cooperation between the MoHE and the OAC and to ensure that data sets are consistent. Methods for achieving this may include annual reviews of data collection and usage (with a view to maximising usage of data and eliminating redundant data collection) and data sharing between the MoHE and the OAC in order to avoid double collection (and the potential for data inconsistencies that this may raise).

11.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To develop a searchable relational database (or databases) of germane standards and accreditation information and make it publicly available online.

The database would be incorporated into the OAC website management plan, but its contents would be jointly owned by the MoHE and the OAC. Specifically, it would include:

• The Fields of Study Classification Framework (see Objective 1.3(b))
• The Credit Framework (see Objective 1.3(c))
• The Qualifications Framework (see Objective 1.3(d))
• Applicable policies for higher education quality management (see, for example, Objectives 1.3(h) and 1.3(i))
• Lists of all mutual recognition agreements with other educational jurisdictions (see Objective 1.3(f))
• Graduate Attributes (see Objective 3.3(a))
• Student Learning Standards (see Objective 3.3(c))
• Lists of all HEPs by accreditation status (see Goal 5)
• Lists of all higher education programs by HEP and by accreditation status (see Goal 6)

The purpose of this database(s) is to provide information to the sector that will assist them with understanding and compliance; to the public that will assist them with educational choices; and to the international community that will help them build confidence in the quality of Omani higher education. The database would be maintained
under appropriate controlled conditions. Where appropriate, it will use the same data structure as other databases within the MoHE with which it will need to relate.

(b) To develop a set of Key Performance Indicators relevant to the national monitoring of quality education.

The development of a set of national key performance indicators (KPI) which would meaningfully monitor quality in higher education is a fraught issue. The MoHE currently has a project underway to establish such a list of KPI.

The Association of Institutional Research (AIR)$^{29}$ and the Carnegie Foundation$^{30}$ are two of the world’s leading organisations in terms of higher education institutional research. It is suggested that expertise could be sourced from these bodies.

(c) To establish and operate a national graduate experience and graduate destinations survey.

Three of the most important measures of higher education quality areas follow:

- peer review;
- students’ feedback on their perception of the quality of their learning experience; and
- graduate destinations (i.e. where do they go after completing their higher education studies?).

Of these, peer review is adequately covered by Goals 3 to 10. The other two are not currently addressed. They would be extremely valuable additions to Oman’s understanding of the quality and effectiveness of its higher education.

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA)$^{31}$ has been operating a dual Course Experience Questionnaire and Graduate Destinations survey for over a decade. All universities participate and make extensive use of the information. The survey has been subject to extensive analysis$^{32}$, critical review$^{33}$ and revision$^{34}$. It is possible that the GCCA could provide one possible benchmark for a similar survey in Oman.

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$^{29}$ See [http://www.airweb.org](http://www.airweb.org). Dr Rick Vorhees, former President of AIR and Managing Director of the Vorhees Group, would be a useful contact.


$^{31}$ See [http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/](http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/). The Executive Director is Dr Cinty Tillbrook, who may be a useful contact.

$^{32}$ Professor Geoff Scott, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality) at the University of Western Sydney Australia, has been leading a project to analyse hundreds of thousands of qualitative CEQ responses. Professor Scott may be a useful contact.


$^{34}$ See, for example, Coates, Hamish, The scale of student engagement for higher education quality assurance, Quality in Higher Education, v.11, n1, April 2005.
12 GENERAL CAPABILITY AND CAPACITY

12.1 Goal

Government will assist the higher education sector to develop the capability and capacity to comply with the quality management system, and the will to exceed it.

12.2 Background

The draft Strategic Plan for Education includes as an Action “the development of national quality enhancement programmes” (p92). This Goal is designed to respond to that Action.

The higher education system in Oman is still in early developmental stage. Demanding compliance with requirements that are beyond the current capabilities and capacity of the sector will be counterproductive. As such, much of the emphasis for the next three to five years must be on building the capabilities and the capacity of the sector to meet standards. The responsibility for this is shared between the OAC, the MoHE and the HEPs themselves.

12.3 Objectives and Strategies

(a) To establish an Oman Quality Network to facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas and effective practices.

The MoHE notes that “the level of cooperation [between private HEPs] is very limited”\(^\text{35}\) This has been reinforced during recent visits by OAC staff to some of these HEPs.

The draft Strategic Plan for Education 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” (p93). This can be addressed through establishing an Oman Quality Network (OQN). This strategy has been used to tremendous and sustainable effect in New Zealand and (in a slightly different form) Australia. Possible roles for a quality network include (and are not limited to) the following:

- providing champions for quality management within provider organisations;
- providing an informal conduit between the OAC, the MoHE and HEPs for matters pertaining to quality management;
- providing feedback on proposed standards, policies and processes;
- enabling the sharing of good practices;
- developing training modules (see Objective 12.3(b));
- running an annual Oman Quality Forum (with a shared sense of ownership and therefore greater buy-in);
- nominating ‘topics of the month’ for discussion; and
- participating in online discussion boards for regular communication.

It is proposed that the OAC would provide administrative support to the OQN and host its website.

Progress Report: The OQN has been established and was officially launched under the Patronage of Her Excellency the Minister of Higher Education on 20 September 2006. An Executive Committee has been established, and financial arrangements are currently being determined.

(b) To provide training to the sector on standards, accreditation processes and quality assurance.

The sector requires assistance in the form of training on quality management issues. There has been some training provided over the past few years, but this has been ad hoc, and incorrectly prioritized. For example, workshops have been offered on how to prepare a self study for the purpose of accreditation. Given that the general level of quality awareness and quality systems within the HEPs is low, this workshop topic was precipitous (one cannot write about systems that do not exist).

It would be better to start with training about what sort of quality management systems an HEP requires, and how to develop and review these systems effectively. A series of training modules, targeted to the needs of the sector, can be developed and delivered face to face and on the Internet. Already, a module on ADRI (a method for analyzing the effectiveness of quality systems) has been developed and is being offered to staff of the OAC, MoHE, Ministry of Manpower and HEPs.

Examples of topics such training modules might address include the following:

- Good governance protocols
- Benchmarking
- Institutional and Program review models
- Curriculum development and approval processes
- Alignment of curriculum, development and assessment
- Student evaluation of teaching systems
- Risk management systems
- Staff performance planning and review systems

In many cases it will be necessary to contract in expertise to develop these tools, although there are many examples of such tools internationally which may be benchmarked to ensure quick results. Intellectual property and authorship rights may remain with the developers but the OAC will have rights to use the intellectual property for its own purposes. In a short period of time (perhaps one year) it should be possible to commission the development of good practice modules from the sector itself via the Oman Quality Network (see Objective 12.3(a)).

Progress Report: A National Training Program has been developed, designed to address the needs of the sector in developing a culture of continuous quality improvement. As at the time of this draft Quality Plan being written, 13 modules have been developed and conducted. Evaluations by participants, and consistently strong attendance figures, suggest that the National Training Program is proving to be useful. A website for the National Training Program has been established, which includes all module files and online discussion boards. The OQN has agreed to take over the management of the training program from March 2007, with the MoHE and OAC continuing to offer support and specialist training.

37 See www.oac.gov.om/enhancement/training/.
(c)  **To encourage national and international benchmarking by higher education institutions.**

There are many international higher education benchmarking consortia which facilitate access to information from benchmark partners about policies and processes. A list of these could be developed and included in the Quality Website. It is possible that some HEPs may seek to join such consortia. It is also possible that the Oman Quality Network (see Objective 12.3(a)) could develop its own national benchmarking activities based on the processes used by international consortia.

**Progress Report:** A training module on benchmarking has been provided. A national benchmarking project on student evaluations has been instigated, which will be overseen by the OQN and facilitated by Martin Carroll.

(d)  **To identify and promote examples of good practice in higher education quality assurance through the AUQA Good Practice Database.**

During the course of both accreditation and audit processes, the OAC will identify a growing number of practices which are proven to be effective and which are potentially usefully transferable to other institutional settings. These should be written up and made available to the wider sector.

The quickest way to get this happening is to enter into an agreement with AUQA for the Good Practice Database. The AUQA Good Practice Database is open to the public free of charge ([http://www.auqa.ed.au/gp/](http://www.auqa.ed.au/gp/)). It has been very successful, with its Good Practices being accessed over 25,000 times since December 2003.

EQAs which engage in external validation of good practices may join the AUQA GPDB. Membership is by way of a Memorandum of Understanding with AUQA. Currently, Australia (AUQA), New Zealand (NZUAAU) and India (NAAC) are members. AUQA has strict criteria for how good practices are identified, validated and published in the database. If this Quality Plan is implemented as proposed, then the OAC will have no difficulty in meeting these criteria.

The OAC’s membership of the AUQA Good Practice Database would:

- enable Omani good practices to be recognized and shared quickly and cost-effectively;
- help ensure that External Reviewers seek the good news as earnestly as they seek opportunities for improvement;
- facilitate greater access to international good practices; and
- position Omani higher education in the company of leading international higher education.

**Progress Report:** Discussions have been held with AUQA regarding Oman joining the GPDB. Approval in principle has been obtained, with final agreement being subject to successfully implementation of the new Quality Audit and Accreditation systems.

(e)  **To conduct and publish research on the development of a culture of quality in the Omani higher education sector which will inform future developments and offer suggestions to peer nations.**

Action research projects will be built on several aspects of the implementation of this Quality Plan. Empirical experiments will be conducted to assess the pre and post state of higher education in relation to specific interventions such as the introduction of new institutional standards, new program standards and the provision of specific training modules. Publishing research will boost the international standing of the MoHE, OAC and the sector in general.
Progress Report: A paper by Carroll and Palermo on the National Training Program and OQN has been presented to the AAIR2006 conference, where it won Best Paper award. Another study is currently underway, led by Dr Josie Palermo and involving MoHE and OAC staff on the research team.

(f) To develop and maintain a Register of External Reviewers.

External Reviewers for accreditation, probation, quality audit panels and appeals subcommittees are one of the most important resources for any EQA. Indeed, the credibility of external review processes depends more on the credibility of the External Reviewers than almost any other factor. The processes for their selection, induction, training and support must be well designed and implemented.

It is proposed that all applicant External Reviewers submit a CV and three referees, all of whom must be contacted. All External Reviewers must be approved by the Board. Appointment to the Register is for a term of 2 years, renewable at the sole discretion of the Board. All Reviewers must undergo training prior to participating in a Review panel.

In order to assemble Panels with appropriate knowledge and experience, it will be necessary to have categories of membership. These categories might include the following:

- Omani national/Omani non-national/international;
- Academic (by discipline)/industry/community; and
- Seniority (for purposes of selecting Panel chairs).

The NZUAU and AUQA provide suitable benchmarks for establishing such a system. Experience there shows that membership of the Register is prestigious, sought-after and highly respected as a consequence of tough admission standards and comprehensive training. Based on the workloads of AUQA and NZQA and the size of their Registers, it is roughly estimated that the Omani Register will require about 150-200 members covering all the required membership categories in appropriate proportions.

Members will be recruited annually. It is proposed that External Reviewers of other EQAs be approached with an invitation to join. It is also proposed that each HEP be invited to nominate up to three candidates for membership. In addition, nominations should be invited from the Board and the MoHE (although Board Members and MoHE officials would not be eligible as this may create a conflict of roles).

Progress Report: This is the highest priority, because without Reviewers, no other quality assurance activities can take place. Nominations have been sought from international networks and the national sector. Over 35 international and 60 national nominations are currently being considered.
APPENDIX A. TERMS AND ACRONYMS

The following definitions of terms and acronyms apply to their usage in this report. This list may be surpassed if the objective pertaining to development of a national glossary is accepted and implemented.

ABET ...................................................... Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (http://www.abet.org).
ADRI ........................................................ A method for analyzing systems comprising a cycle of four key stages: Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement.
Agent ........................................................ An HEP which provides the accredited programs of other HEPs.
AUQA ..................................................... Australian Universities Quality Agency (http://www.auqa.edu.au).
Broad Fields ............................................. The broadest categories of the classification. They are distinguished from each other on the basis of theoretical content and the broad purpose for which the study is undertaken (definition taken from ASCED).
CNAP .................................................... National Commission of Accreditation, Chile (http://www.cnap.cl)
Detailed Fields ....................................... Subdivisions of the narrow fields. They are distinguished from other detailed fields in the same narrow field on the basis of methods and techniques, tools and equipment, and stricter application of the criteria used for broad and narrow field (definition taken from ASCED).
EQA ..................................................... External quality assurance agency (may accredit, quality audit or both).
EQUIS .................................................. The European Quality Improvement System (http://www.efmd.org/equis/).
External Review Panel ........................... A panel of experts, independent from the entity subject to review, convened to review an institution or program (in this, the main types of external review panels are the HEP Quality Audit Panels, Provider Licensing or Accreditation Panels and Program Licensing or Accreditation Panels).
Field of Education .................................. The subject matter of an educational activity. Fields of education are related to each other through the similarity of subject matter, through the broad purpose under which the education is undertaken, and through the theoretical content which underpins the subject matter (definition taken from ASCED).
GCHE .................................................. Graduate Certificate of Higher Education.
GGP.......................................................Guidelines for Good Practice (INQAAHE, 2005. 
http://inqaahe.org/docs/GGP%20for%20printing.doc).
GPDB ..........................................................The AUQA Good Practice Database (http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/).
HEP ..........................................................Higher education provider (a generic term designed to include all entities which provide higher education programs even though they may have other formal designations, such as University, University College, College or Higher College of Technology).
Institutional Licensing.................................See Provider Licensing
Inter alia...........................................................(Latin) among other things
ISCED.....................................................International Standard Classification System of Education 
KPI..........................................................Key Performance Indicator
License ..........................................................Permission from Government to operate.
MoHE..........................................................Ministry of Higher Education.
Multi-badged degree......................................A single qualification endorsed with the seals of all legitimate accreditation bodies that have accredited the program.
NAAC..........................................................National Assessment and Accreditation Council (of India – http://www.naac-india.com)
Narrow Fields..............................................Subdivisions of the broad fields. They are distinguished from other narrow fields in the same broad field on the basis of object of interest, and the purpose for which the study is undertaken (definition taken from ASCED).
NSAI ............................................................Non self-accrediting institution (i.e. a HEP which must have its higher education programs externally accredited).
NZUAAU ..................................................New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (http://www.aau.ac.nz).
OAC..........................................................Oman Accreditation Council.
OQF..........................................................Oman Qualifications Framework.
Probation ..................................................... If an accreditation application is unsuccessful, the institution or program will be placed under probation for a period of one or two years. During this time, the HEP is expected to address issues identified by the accreditation panel and resubmit the accreditation application. New students may not be enrolled into an institution or program while it is on probation.

Professional Accreditation ............................. A process whereby a professional body conducts an independent assessment of an institution or program to determine whether that HEP or program meets the professional body’s standards.

Program Accreditation ................................. An independent, external method for providing confidence to the public that the quality of the educational experience (curriculum, teaching, assessment, resourcing and student learning outcomes) of a particular program is of acceptable standard.

Program Approval ........................................ This term is not part of the proposed Oman Quality Management System, because it is ambiguous (it could mean either Provisional Program Accreditation or Program Accreditation).

Program Licensing ...................................... Formal approval from the Ministry of Higher Education to offer a specific program of higher education. A Program License is required before students may be enrolled in the program.

Program Portfolio ...................................... A document which contains the results of a HEP’s self review of the quality of one of its programs. The Program Portfolio is a key part of the application for Program Licensing and Program Accreditation.

Program Recognition .................................... A status, equivalent to Program Accreditation, given to a Program which is accredited in another jurisdiction and which meets the OAC’s criteria for ensuring that quality of the program and student learning outcomes in Oman is equivalent to the quality of the program and student learning outcomes in its country of origin.

Provider Accreditation ................................. Independent verification that a higher education institution has the general capability and capacity to deliver higher education programs to students in accordance with the requirements and strategic directions of the sector.

Provider Licensing ...................................... Formal approval from the Government to operate as a provider of higher education (HEP). A Provider License is required before students may be admitted to the HEP.

Provider Portfolio ...................................... A document which contains the results of a HEP’s self review of its institutional quality. The Provider Portfolio is a key part of the application for Provider Licensing and Program Accreditation.

Provider Probation ..................................... A status given to a HEP which has failed in its application to gain Accreditation. Provider Probation is for a fixed term (between 1 and 2 years), at the end of which the HEP must reapply for Accreditation.

Provisional Program Accreditation ............... See Program Licensing.

Provisional Program Recognition ................. A type of Program Licensing especially for imported programs of higher education. See Program Recognition also.
Provisional Provider Accreditation........... See Provider Licensing.
QAA.................................................. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (of the United Kingdom – see http://www.qaa.ac.uk)
Qualification ...................................... The higher education award granted upon the successful completion of an accredited program of study.
Quality Assurance.............................. The process of providing stakeholders with confidence that the quality of higher education (and other related activities such as research) meets appropriate standards and/or expectations.
Quality Audit ...................................... An external, independent means for evaluating the effectiveness of the processes that a HEP has in place for achieving its educational mission, vision and goals.
Quality Enhancement........................... A general term relating to activities designed to improve quality (such as training or benchmarking).
Quality Plan ....................................... A generic term used to refer to this document, i.e. the Plan for an Omani Higher Education Quality Management System.
ROSQA.......................................... Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance.
SAI.................................................. Self-accrediting institution (i.e. a HEP which may approve its own higher education programs without requiring external approval – other than professional body accreditation where such is required).
SQU................................................ Sultan Qaboos University
Strategic Plan for Education................... A Strategic Plan for Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2006 – 2020
## APPENDIX B. SUMMARY OF GOALS & OBJECTIVES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The educational system infrastructure will comprise integrated frameworks for fields of study, qualifications and credit, and supporting policies, which will ensure that Oman’s education system can interface with the education systems of benchmark countries.</td>
<td>(a) To revise the classification system for Higher Education Providers.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) To adopt a standard educational classification framework.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>In progress. A Working Group has been established, Chaired by Dr Said Al Rabiey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) To revise, maintain and disseminate a common credit framework to facilitate credit transfer, accreditation and recognition processes.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) To revise, maintain and disseminate the common Oman Qualifications Framework.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>In progress. Project being led by Martin Carroll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e) To map credit and qualifications equivalence with other international frameworks and make this information publicly available.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(f) To develop intergovernmental processes for negotiating and agreeing mutual recognition of higher education credit and qualifications.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(g) To establish an Omani glossary of terms used in quality assurance (in the broadest sense).</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>In progress. Project being led by Martin Carroll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(h) To develop and implement policy in relation to ownership of intellectual property associated with curricula.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(i) To develop and implement policy in relation to ‘qualification multiplication’.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(j) To develop and implement policy in relation to recognition of prior learning and recognition of prior experience to facilitate consistent standards.</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A comprehensive suite of higher education provider standards will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will guide provider licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.</td>
<td>(a) To develop a revised set of standards for Higher Education Provider licensing and accreditation.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A comprehensive suite of standards for student learning will be established for the Oman Higher Education sector, which will help shape the future of the Omani society, guide program licensing and accreditation, and help maintain equivalence with international standards.</td>
<td>(a) To develop, maintain and disseminate a set of national graduate attributes.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) To develop and implement national assessment of student attainment of national graduate attributes upon entry to higher education programs and upon graduation from those programs as one means for determining the value added by higher education.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) To develop, maintain and disseminate student learning standards for narrow fields of study.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>In progress. A template is under preparation and Working Groups have been established for Foundation Programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A national system of independent audits of the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems of higher education providers will be established to encourage the maintenance and advancement of those systems</td>
<td>(a) To support the accreditation process with an effective national system of Provider Quality Audits.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>In progress. Two pilot audits are scheduled for early 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) To, at government level, enter into mutual recognition arrangements with provider quality audit agencies of targeted countries.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A national system of provider licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides</td>
<td>(a) To revise the purpose and principles of Provider Accreditation (including all its stages).</td>
<td>MoHE &amp; OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) To revise and implement an effective Provider Licensing (‘Provisional Accreditation’) process.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>To revise and implement an effective Provider Accreditation process.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d)</td>
<td>To emphasise quality improvement over quality control by providing HEPs with a Probationary period in which to respond to failed Provider Accreditation applications.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e)</td>
<td>To implement appropriate certification of Provider Accreditation status.</td>
<td>OAC &amp; MoHE</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f)</td>
<td>To ensure all higher education institutions are properly titled.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Pending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g)</td>
<td>To develop and maintain an online national register of accredited institutions.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>In progress. The database and web front end are in design stages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. A national system of higher education program licensing and accreditation will be established, which provides confidence to the public of the standing of higher education programs offered in Oman and facilitates student mobility.

| (a) | To revise the purpose and principles of Program Accreditation (including all its stages). | OAC | High | In progress. |
| (b) | To revise and implement an effective process for Program Licensing (also known as Provisional Program Accreditation or Program Approval) against national standards prior to those programs being delivered. | MoHE | High | Pending. |
| (c) | To revise and implement an effective process for fully accrediting higher education programs against national standards after the first cohort of students has graduated. | OAC | Medium | Pending. |
| (d) | To emphasise quality improvement over quality control by providing HEPs with a Probationary period in which to respond to failed accreditation applications. | OAC | Medium | Pending. |
| (e) | To develop a system for exempting foreign accredited programs offered by Omani HEPs from Omani Program Accreditation based upon satisfactory foreign quality assurance arrangements. | OAC | High | Pending. |
7. The quality management system will be regarded as fair and credible by being supported with a professional appeals process that meets international standards.

| (f) To develop and implement criteria for recognizing international external quality assurance agencies which facilitate effective quality assurance of transnational programs. | OAC | High | Pending. |
| (g) To implement appropriate certification of program accreditation status. | MoHE & OAC | High | Pending. |

8. A national system of Foundation Program reviews will be established, which helps ensure that those programs adequately prepare students for their higher education studies.

| (a) To develop and implement an Appeals policy for all accreditation processes and quality audits that will be regarded as fair, robust and final. | MoHE | High | Pending. |
| (b) To develop and implement an Appeals process to support the Appeals policy. | MoHE | High | Pending. |
| (c) To consider establishing an independent Student Ombudsman to deal with complaints from students. | MoHE | Low (Optional) | Pending. |

9. The quality management system will ensure that higher education plays a leading role in developing national research capacity and capability.

| (a) To develop, maintain and disseminate research methods courses as required components of Omani degree. | MoHE or Research Council? | Medium (Optional) | Pending. |
| (b) To develop, maintain and disseminate standards for the recognition of national and international scholarly outputs and creative works. | MoHE or OAC or Research Council? | Low (Optional) | Pending. |
| (c) To develop and implement a process for accrediting research output publications. | OAC or Research Council? | Low (Optional) | Pending. |
| (d) To develop and maintain a standards-based research outputs database. | OAC or Research Council? | Low (Optional) | Pending. |

10. The quality of higher education teaching in Oman

| (a) To develop principles for good quality higher education teaching. | MoHE | High | Pending. |
will, in the interests of providing the best possible education to students, rise to a level comparable with benchmark countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(b) To develop and provide a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching.</th>
<th>MoHE</th>
<th>Medium (Optional)</th>
<th>A project plan being prepared in association with Monash University. Pending.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(c) To develop a Higher Education Teacher Registration system.</td>
<td>MoHE (or a new independent body)</td>
<td>Low (Optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. National data sets and other information will be collected, analysed and, where appropriate, made public to monitor progress with the Quality Plan and to facilitate benchmarking and student choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) To develop a searchable relational database (or databases) of germane standards and accreditation information and make it publicly available online.</th>
<th>OAC</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>In progress. The database and web front end are in design stages. It will be populated over time as the standards become available.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(b) To develop a set of Key Performance Indicators relevant to the national monitoring of quality education.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>In progress. The MoHE has a project underway led by Dr Khamis Al Belushi. Pending. International experts have been identified to assist if required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) To establish and operate a national graduate experience and graduate destinations survey.</td>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Medium (Optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. Government will assist the higher education sector to develop the capability and capacity to comply with the quality management system, and the will to exceed it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) To establish an Oman Quality Network to facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas and effective practices.</th>
<th>Sector (with support from MoHE and OAC)</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>The OQN has been launched and an Executive established.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(b) To provide training to the sector on standards, accreditation processes and quality assurance.</td>
<td>OAC &amp; MoHE (the OQN will take responsibility for general training from March 2007)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>In progress. A dozen training modules have been offered to date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) To encourage national and international benchmarking by higher education institutions.</td>
<td>OAC</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>A national benchmarking project for student evaluations has commenced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(d) To identify and promote examples of good practice in higher education quality assurance through the AUQA Good Practice Database.

(d) To identify and promote examples of good practice in higher education quality assurance through the AUQA Good Practice Database.

OAC (the means for achieving this are the audit and accreditation processes)

Medium (Optional)

Agreement in principle has been obtained with AUQA.

(e) To conduct and publish research on the development of a culture of quality in the Omani higher education sector which will inform future developments and offer suggestions to peer nations.

(e) To conduct and publish research on the development of a culture of quality in the Omani higher education sector which will inform future developments and offer suggestions to peer nations.

MoHE & OAC & Sector

Low (Optional)

One project is underway – a pretest/posttest study of the impact of the National training Program.

(f) To develop and maintain a Register of External Reviewers.

(f) To develop and maintain a Register of External Reviewers.

OAC

High

In progress. Over 35 international and 40 national nominations are currently being considered.
### APPENDIX C. SUMMARY TIMELINE OF KEY PROCESSES*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>HEP Quality Audits</th>
<th>Provider Accreditation</th>
<th>Program Accreditation &amp; Recognition</th>
<th>Foundation Program Audit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td>HEP Quality Audits</td>
<td>Each HEP is audited once in the 6 year cycle.</td>
<td>Standards available for 2 Narrow Fields of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing Accreditation</td>
<td>Each HEP undergoes accreditation three years after its audit. Under exceptional circumstances, some may apply earlier.</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; review of all Foundation Programs at end of 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td>Pilot studies conducted</td>
<td>Standards available for 6 Narrow Fields of Study (in total). Program accreditation available for standards which have been public 6 months or more.</td>
<td>Foundation Program standards revised and published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td>HEP Accreditations commence</td>
<td>Standards available for 10 Narrow Fields of Study (in total). Program accreditation available for standards which have been public 6 months or more.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standards available for 14 Narrow Fields of Study (in total). Program accreditation available for standards which have been public 6 months or more.</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; review of all Foundation Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; cycle and review</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td>Foundation Program standards revised and published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etc. Plus, some programs will now be entering their second accreditation cycle.</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; review of all Foundation Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td>Foundation Program standards revised and published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle</td>
<td>HEP Accreditation becomes compulsory (by now all HEPs should have been through audit and accreditation).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle and review</td>
<td></td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; review of all Foundation Programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; cycle?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation Program standards revised and published</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This timeline does not include HEP and Program Licensing. Those processes are already established; the proposals in this draft Quality Plan seek to improve them.
APPENDIX D. OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED PROVIDER APPROVALS PROCESSES

Provider Application

Provider Licensing (Provisional Accreditation)
Conducted by MOHE

Provider Quality Audit
Conducted by OAC

Provider Accreditation
Conducted by OAC

2-3 years

Pass

Provider Probation
Conducted by OAC

1-2 years

Pass

Provider Accreditation Terminated

Fail

Audits will start in 2006/7

2-3 years

Appeal Process
Conducted independently

Fail

Provider Accreditation Terminated
APPENDIX E. OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED PROGRAM ACCREDITATION & RECOGNITION PROCESSES

- **Program Accreditation**: Conducted by OAC
  - Pass
  - 5 years

- **Program Probation**: Conducted by OAC
  - Pass
  - 1-2 yrs
  - Fail

- **Program Probation**: Conducted by MOHE
  - Fail
  - 5 years
  - Pass

- **Program Probation**: Conducted by MOHE
  - Fail
  - 1-2 yrs

- **Appeals Process**: Conducted independently

- **Omani Program**: After first cohort completes
  - Fail
  - 5 years
  - Pass

- **Foreign Program**: After first cohort completes
  - Fail

- **Provisional Prog. Recognition**: Conducted by MOHE
  - Fail
  - 1-2 yrs

- **Prog. Recognition**: Conducted by OAC
  - Fail
  - 5 years
  - Pass

- **Prog. Recognition**: Conducted by MOHE
  - Fail

- **Program Termination**
APPENDIX F. PROPOSED PROVIDER QUALITY AUDIT PROCESS

Start Provider Quality Audit

- HEP undertakes self-audit against prev. Accreditation Report and HEP Strategic Plan

Provider Quality Audit Portfolio

- Provider Quality Audit Portfolio

OAC establishes Quality Audit Panel

Panel assesses Portfolio using ADRI

- Panel assesses Portfolio using ADRI

Panel obtains further information from HEP

- Panel obtains further information from HEP

Panel deliberates

- Panel deliberates

Panel undertakes Audit Visit

- Panel undertakes Audit Visit

Panel Chair and Quality Audit Coordinator undertake Planning Visit

- Panel Chair and Quality Audit Coordinator undertake Planning Visit

Audit Report (v1) prepared based on written evidence. For Panel only.

- Audit Report (v1) prepared based on written evidence. For Panel only.

HEP prepares submission on errors of fact or inappropriate emphasis in (v2)

- HEP prepares submission on errors of fact or inappropriate emphasis in (v2)

Panel considers HEP’s submission

- Panel considers HEP’s submission

Audit Report (v3) presented to OAC Board for approval

- Audit Report (v3) presented to OAC Board for approval

Panel addresses Board’s concerns about policy and process

- Panel addresses Board’s concerns about policy and process

Audit Report (v4) issued to HEP

- Audit Report (v4) issued to HEP

Yes

- Yes

Report appealed?

- Report appealed?

Audit Report (v5) publicly released

- Audit Report (v5) publicly released

Yes

- Yes

Board approves Report?

- Board approves Report?

No

- No

End Provider Quality Audit. Go to Provider Accreditation

- End Provider Quality Audit. Go to Provider Accreditation

Yes

- Yes

Go to Appeals

- Go to Appeals

No

- No

Go to Appeals

- Go to Appeals

KEY

- Process

- Decision

- Document

- Terminator / Link
APPENDIX G. PROPOSED CLASSIFICATIONS OF PROVIDER ACCREDITATION STATUS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Licensee Higher Education Provider</th>
<th>National Accredited Higher Education Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Also known as Provisionally Accredited. The HEP Agent has been approved to offer the higher education programs of other accredited HEPs. It must seek National Accreditation prior to the first cohort of degree students graduating.</td>
<td>The HEP has been independently accredited against national standards for agents and found to be fully satisfactory. This is the highest HEP Agent accreditation status. It must be reaccredited every five years. A Nationally Accredited HEP is also a Nationally Accredited HEP Agent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probationally Accredited Higher Education Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The HEP Agent has failed its application for National Accreditation and has been given one or two years to rectify identified issues and reapply for National Accreditation. No new students may be enrolled into a Probationally Accredited HEP Agent. A Probationally Accredited HEP Agent cannot also be a Nationally Accredited HEP.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEP Agent Accreditation Terminated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The HEP Agent’s accreditation has been terminated, having failed National Accreditation and Probational Accreditation. The entity is no longer a HEP Agent, nor can it be a higher education institution. It may not offer any higher education programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education Provider Accreditation Terminated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The HEP and/or HEP Agent’s accreditation has been terminated, having failed National Accreditation and Probational Accreditation. The institution is no longer a HEP and may not offer its own higher education programs. The entity may continue to be a Nationally Accredited HEP Agent provided that the applicable standards for that classification continue to be met.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non Accredited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The entity is neither Licensed nor Accredited as a higher education institution or as an agent institution in any jurisdiction or form officially recognised by the Sultanate of Oman. It is proposed that by 2011 it will be illegal for Non Accredited institutions to offer higher education programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H. PROPOSED PROVIDER ACCREDITATION PROCESS

- **Start Provider Accreditation**
  - HEP undertakes self-study
  - Provider Accreditation Portfolio
  - Preliminary Assessment by OAC staff
  - Ready to proceed?
    - Yes: OAC establishes Provider Accreditation Panel
    - No: Feedback provided to HEP

  - Board approves Report?
    - Yes: Panel considers HEP’s submission
    - No: Panel obtains further information from HEP

  - HEP Accreditation Report (v3) presented to OAC Board for approval
    - Panel considers HEP's submission on the HEP Accreditation Report (v2)
    - HEP prepares submission on errors of fact or inappropriate emphasis in (v2)

  - Panel Chair and Exec Officer undertake Planning Visit
  - Panel undertakes Accreditation Visit

  - Panel deliberates
    - Yes: HEP Accreditation Report (v4) issued to HEP in confidence
    - No: Panel addresses Board's concerns about policy and process

  - Was the HEP Accredited?
    - Yes: Go to Provider Accreditation
    - No: Decision appealed?
      - Yes: Go to Provider Probation
      - No: Go to Appeals

  - Appropriate public notifications issued
  - Appropriate Certificate of Accreditation status issued

- **Process**
- **Decision**
- **Document**
- **Terminator / Link**
APPENDIX I. PROPOSED PROVIDER PROBATION PROCESS

* The Standards will vary depending on whether the applicant is seeking HEP or HEP Agent status.
APPENDIX J. PROPOSED CLASSIFICATIONS OF PROGRAM ACCREDITATION STATUS

- **Licensec**
  The program has been approved to be taught. It must seek National Accreditation after the first cohort of students has graduated.

- **Nationally Accredited**
  The program has been independently accredited against national standards and found to be fully satisfactory. This is the highest accreditation status. It must be reaccredited every five years.

- **Provisionally Recognised**
  Applicable to imported programs already accredited in other academic jurisdictions. Equivalent to Licensed Program. The program has been approved to be taught. It must seek Program Recognition after the first cohort of students has graduated.

- **Accreditation Recognised**
  Applicable to imported programs already accredited in other academic jurisdictions. The program is accredited by another country’s jurisdiction but is recognised by the Sultanate of Oman as being of equivalent standing to a Nationally Accredited Program. It must be reaccredited every five years.

- **Probationally Accredited**
  The program has failed its application for National Accreditation and has been given one or two years to rectify identified issues and reapply for National Accreditation. No new students may be enrolled into the Probationally Accredited Program.

- **Probationally Recognised**
  Applicable to imported programs already accredited in other academic jurisdictions. Equivalent to Probationally Accredited Program. The program has failed its application for Recognition and has been given one or two years to rectify identified issues and reapply for Recognition. No new students may be enrolled into the Probationally Recognised Program.

- **Accreditation Terminated**
  The program’s accreditation has been terminated, having failed National Accreditation and Probational Accreditation. The program may no longer be offered by that HEI.

- **Recognition Terminated**
  The program’s Accreditation Recognition has been terminated, having failed Accreditation Recognition and Probational Recognition. The program may no longer be offered by that HEP (unless it has been accredited as an Omani program).

- **Non Accredited**
  The program is not accredited in a form recognised by the Sultanate of Oman. By 20?? it will be illegal to recruit students into Non Accredited degree programs.
APPENDIX K. PROPOSED PROGRAM LICENSING (PROVISIONAL ACCREDITATION) PROCESS

1. Start Provisional Program Accreditation
   - HEP prepares Application
   - Provisional Program Accreditation Application
   - Preliminary assessment by MoHE staff
   - Ready to proceed?
     - Yes: MoHE establishes Program Licensing Pane
     - No: MoHE discusses reasons for rejection with HEP

2. Program Licensing Report (v2) sent to DG for approval
   - Panel deliberates and drafts Report by web & email
   - Panel Chair and Exec Officer report on visit to rest of Panel
   - Panel Chair and Exec Officer undertake Provisional Program Accreditation Visit
   - Program Licensing Report (v1). For Panel only.
   - Panel obtains further information from HEP
   - DG approves Report?
     - Yes: Program Licensing Report (v3) issued to HEP in confidence
     - No: DG addresses DG’s concerns about policy and process

3. Decision appealed?
   - Yes: Go to Appeals
   - No: End of Program Licensing

4. Was the Prog. Licensed?
   - Yes: Certificate of Program License status issued
   - No: Appropriate public notifications issued
   - End Program Licensing. Go to Program Accreditation

KEY
- Process
- Decision
- Document
- Terminator / Link
APPENDIX L. PROPOSED PROGRAM ACCREDITATION PROCESS

1. Start Program Accreditation

2. HEP undertakes self-study of Program against Standards

3. Program Accreditation Portfolio

4. Preliminary Assessment by OAC staff

5. Ready to proceed?
   - Yes
   - No
   - OAC staff discuss reasons for rejection with HEP

6. OAC staff discuss reasons for rejection with HEP

7. OAC establishes Program Accreditation Panel

8. Panel assesses Portfolio against Standards

9. Panel obtains further information from HEP

10. Program Accreditation Report (v1) prepared based on written evidence

11. Panel Exec Officer undertakes Planning Visit

12. Panel undertakes Accreditation Visit

13. Panel deliberates

14. Program Accreditation Report v2 issued to HEP for comment

15. HEP prepares submission on errors of fact or inappropriate emphasis in (v2)

16. HEP submission on the Program Accreditation Report (v2)

17. Panel considers HEP’s submission

18. Program Accreditation Report (v3) presented to OAC Board for approval

   - Yes
   - No
   - Panel considers HEP’s submission

20. Panel addresses Board’s concerns about policy and process

21. Program Accreditation Report (v4) issued to HEP in confidence

22. Was the Program Accredited?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Decision appealed?

23. Decision appealed?
   - Yes
   - Go to Appeals
   - No
   - Was the Program Accredited?

24. Go to Appeals

25. Go to Program Probation

26. Appropriate Certificate of Accreditation status issued

27. Appropriate public notifications issued

28. End Program Accreditation. Repeat after 5 years.
APPENDIX M. PROPOSED PROGRAM PROBATION PROCESS

Start Program Probation → HEP undertakes self-study → Program Probation Portfolio → OAC establishes Program Probation Pane → Panel assesses Portfolio against Standards and Probation Report → Panel obtains further information from HEP → Program Probation Report (v1) prepared based on written evidence.

Panel considers HEP Submission → HEP submission on Program Probation Report (v2) → HEP prepares submission on errors of fact or inappropriate emphasis in (v2) → Program Probation Report (v2) issued to Applicant for comment → Panel deliberates → Panel undertakes Accreditation Visit → Panel Exec Officer undertakes Planning Visit.

Program Probation Report (v3) presented to OAC Board for approval → Board approves Report?

Yes → Program Probation Report (v4) issued to HEP in confidence → Was the Program Accredited?

Yes → Appropriate Certificate of Accreditation status issued → Appropriate public notifications issued → End Program Probation Go to Program Accreditation in Syrs.

No → Panel addresses Board’s concerns about policy and process → Go to Appeals

Yes → Decision appealed?

Yes → Program Accreditation Terminated. HEP may no longer offer the Program → End of Program Probation.

No → Nc
APPENDIX N. PROPOSED PROGRAM RECOGNITION PROCESS

1. Start Program Recognition

2. Omani HEP submits to OAC an application for Recognition of foreign Program Accreditation

3. Program Recognition Application

4. Notarised copies of all applicable current accreditation reports and results (academic and professional)

5. Affidavit from foreign HEP that the Program in Oman is, in practice, equivalent to home country

6. Report from Foreign EQA on the effectiveness of the Foreign HEP’s QA for transnational programs

7. OAC convenes a (small) Recognition Panel to consider the submission

8. Is the Application in order and judged acceptable by the panel?
   - Yes
   - No

9. Are the accrediting authorities credible and the accreditations current?
   - Yes
   - No

10. Is the Affidavit in order?
    - Yes
    - No

11. Is the EQA credible and are its findings satisfactory?
    - Yes
    - No

12. The Recognition Panel reaches a negative finding.

13. Program Recognition granted. Repeat after 5 years.

14. Does the HEP Appeal?
   - Yes
   - No

15. Go to Appeals

16. Program Recognition Terminated. The HEP may choose to resubmit for Oman accreditation.
APPENDIX O. PROPOSED APPEALS PROCESS

Start Appeal

1. Application for appeal made by HEP (the Appellant)
   
   Application sent to Appeal Chair for eligibility check
   
   Appeal application criteria met?

   Yes
   
   Application submitted to the OAC & original External Panel for response

   Nc
   
   Letter of rejection sent to Appellant

   Nc
   
   Letter of rejection sent to Appellant

   Yes
   
   Appeal Chair and OAC staffer assemble and train appropriate Appeal Committee

   Appeal Committee convenes to review documents and hear witnesses

   Appeal Committee Decision sent to Minister for approval

   Minister approves decision?

   Yes
   
   Revised Audit Report (v5)?

   Yes
   
   OAC Board approve Report (v5)?

   Yes
   
   Go to appropriate step in Licensing, Accreditation or Probation process

   No
   
   New decision enacted

   Nc
   
   New Licensing, Accreditation, Recognition or Probation Pane convened and process repeated

   Letter of rejection sent to Appellant

   End of Appeal

OAC’s response to Appeal Application

Appeal Type

Audit

What is the Appeal Decision?

Upheld

Go to appropriate step in Licensing, Accreditation or Probation process

Process and decision overturned

End of Appeal

Process overturned, but decision indeterminable

Letter of rejection sent to Appellant

Go to appropriate step in Licensing/Accreditation/Recognition/Probation process

License/Accreditation/Recognition/Probation

KEY

Process

Decision

Document

Terminator / Link