

Leading Quality Enhancement in Higher Education

Message of the OQN Chair

The Oman Quality Network (OQN) is proud to launch its own newsletter – The OQN Newsletter!

The newsletter will be yet another medium to communicate with our peers, to highlight the important developments within the higher education sector primarily in Oman, and to keep our membership abreast of upcoming OQN events.

We are all entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring quality education to students joining the higher education institutions in Oman. We are under no illusion that the path of quality assurance and enhancement is a challenging one – but a challenge that we embrace!

Let us all share our concerns and experiences, and work hand-in-hand to keep the sector moving forward and upward.

On behalf of the Executive Committee members, I would like to convey to you best wishes of a prosperous academic year.



Annie Lajinian-Magarian
Chair of the OQN &
Director of the Foundation
Program, Dhofar University

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The Importance of Sharing Quality Assurance good practices among HEIs

The old saying: “Learn from other’s mistakes,” has been used for quite a long time in different fields and occasions. It has proven that it is important to learn from other individual experiences. Nowadays, if others are doing well, people tend to be more interested in what they are doing and how they are doing it well, so that they, too, can be successful. Therefore, sharing good practices has become a key part attributing to the success of any activity including Quality Assurance (QA).

Quality is not an act, it is a habit
Aristotle

A good practice is usually a standard-operating method that produces good performance and results. Good practices are not, however, rules or laws. They are bendable, adaptable to individual needs and systems. They are learning tools.

Knowledge and good-practice sharing on QA experiences among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country and with other regions in the world is particularly needed. Spreading a culture that embraces the sharing of good practices among HEIs helps avoid reinventing the wheel, and more quickly enact new processes or programs that can help improve the quality of higher education. Sharing what successful HEIs are doing in quality assurance will encourage others to do the same.

That is why the Oman Quality Network (OQN) considers that the sharing of good practices among HEIs in Oman is one of its objectives and is striving toward achieving this objective through the organization of a series of seminars, workshops and conferences. However, when seeking best practices from the OQN membership, one must be specific and should ask specific questions to get specific answers. For instance, instead of, “Do you have any best practices in program assessment?” ask, “What do you do to assess programs?” Or ask, “Where have you found success in assessing programs?” Be more specific and instead of asking, “How do you obtain and maintain qualified staff?” ask, “What have you done to acquire and maintain qualified staff



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through a specific hiring program and initiative?” Ask to “Describe what the hiring program necessitates and any results you’ve seen.”



Prof. Adel Gastli
OQN Executive
Committee Co-opted
Member & Director of
Quality Assurance Office,
Sultan Qaboos University

Establishing Quality Assurance Units in HEIs

In order to fulfill the aim of Oman Quality Network (OQN) i.e. "to build a quality conscious, knowledge rich higher education sector through the sharing of ideas, strategies, research, and practices that inform the pursuit of quality improvement", the OQN conducted the following seminar and workshop in 2010:

- Seminar on Learning by sharing – Implementation of Oman Academic Standards for GFPs
- Workshop on Establishing a Quality Assurance Unit in Higher Education Institutions

OQN conducted these workshops as OQN is committed to quality enhancement in higher education sector and to build capacity and to cater to the needs of the Omani higher education sector.

The workshop on establishing QA units in HEI's was conducted at the Oman Tourism College and was led by Professor Dolina Dowling, the Head of the Higher Education Review Unit and deputy CEO of the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

More than 100 delegates participated representing all higher education institutions in Oman. During the workshop, the participants were engaged in matters related to establishing and running a Quality Assurance Unit, focusing on the challenges of their effective functioning.

The workshop was successful indeed and achieved its aims. We are thankful to the support and encouragement of our peers.



Dr Nasir Ahmad Khan
OQN Executive Committee
Member & Head of Quality Assurance Department
Mazoon College

The starting point for improvement is to recognize the need
Masaaki Imai

International QA events

The Asia-Pacific Quality Network Conference in March 2011. The Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) is organizing its annual conference and AGM in 2-3 March 2011. This conference is the main annual event for discussing and advancing quality assurance in higher education throughout Asia and the Pacific region. The Office of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), Bangalore, India is hosting this event.

The target audience for the APQN Conference and AGM is primarily those associated with quality agencies in the region. This includes APQN Members and Observers, the APQN Board, Committees and Project Groups. In addition, others working in the area of quality assurance and improvement in higher education and government agencies are welcome to attend the conference days that are open to non-members. For more information, please visit www.apqn.org

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Conference in April 2011. The INQAAHE 2011 Biennial Conference will take place in Madrid, Spain, from 4th till the 7th April, 2011. The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) is hosting this conference.

The conference theme is "Quality Assurance: Foundation for the Future". There are four conference subthemes:

- Globalizing forces and national/regional goals in higher education: emerging issues
- Professionalization of quality assurance
- Effective QA processes for diversity, development and sustainability
- Independence of QA vis a vis different stakeholders

The OQN is going to deliver a paper

titled "Oman Quality Network: Evaluating Effectiveness" under the theme "effective QA processes for diversity, development, and sustainability". The paper is going to highlight the outcomes of the external evaluation that the OQN underwent in March 2010. The evaluation was conducted by Remarkable Performance, a UK consultancy team, funded by the British Council. For more information about this conference, please visit www.inqahe.org.



Fakhriya Al Habsi
OQN Administrative Officer & Quality Assurance Officer, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Blackboard in the Colleges of Applied Sciences

The Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS), with locations in Sur, Salalah, Sohar, Rustaq, Ibri and Nizwa, have been utilizing the Learning Management System (LMS) BlackBoard since the Fall semester of 2007. The system is used to deliver content for Information Technology, International Business Administration, Design, English, Communications and Engineering programs. Since then, the colleges have experienced considerable difficulty in implementing BlackBoard. However, despite the difficulties encountered as is the case in comparatively young institutions, CAS have benefited from using BlackBoard which has allowed instructors to communicate with students in a convenient and secure environment, provided a forum for regular development of technological skills, and enhanced the efficiency of assessment delivery.

The most visible positive effects experienced across the CAS system have been transformations in the nature of student-lecturer communication and security. Students can access course content when and where it is convenient



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for them. In other words, BlackBoard has allowed lecturers to deliver content to students on the students' terms. This content can and does include lecture information, assignments, web links, assessments, activities, discussions, announcements, grades and attendance information. Furthermore, the content is delivered securely. Not only does the lecturer have precise control over the accessibility and availability of content, but also grade and attendance information can be delivered with complete discretion.

Additionally, BlackBoard has been an excellent medium for the development of computer proficiency for both students and lecturers. While interacting with the above content, users constantly hone their skills. BlackBoard allows its users to familiarize themselves with forums, electronic messaging and modern research tools among other things. With the implementation of BlackBoard 9, these tools will include wikis, weblogs and other Web 2.0 innovations. All of this has been or will be particularly valuable given the developmental state of our users' collective computer skills.

Finally, the Nizwa CAS English department was able to deliver a portion of the continuous assessment over the last three semesters to students through BlackBoard. Though the continuous assessment has been scrapped, the tools at our disposal were appreciated. Students benefited from positive exposure to the future of assessment delivery, and lecturers enjoyed convenient and accurate marking and invigilation conditions.



Dr Salim Al Naib
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 Member & Assistant
 Dean, Nizwa College of
 Applied Sciences*

OQN Regional Conference 2012

Following the great success of OQN Quality Conference in 2008 the Oman Quality Network is planning its second Conference on 20th and 21st February 2012, which is still in the approval process.

OQN envisages wider participation from Oman and the GCC, and hence this will be a Regional Conference. The title of the Conference is "Quality Management and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education".

It is quality rather than quantity that matters

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

This conference will provide opportunities for stakeholders to deliberate on developments in the higher education sector in the Sultanate of Oman and the region, and also to share thoughts and practices on how the sector can be nurtured and

stimulated through sustainable policies and practices in Quality Management and Quality Enhancement. The conference will enable us to:

- Review recent developments and their impact on Policy and Practice in Quality Assurance in higher education in Oman and the region.
- Highlight best practices in Quality Management, and policy and Practice in higher education.
- Review progress made by HEI's in the implementation of Quality Management systems in Oman and the region.

Once the proposal of the OQN is approved, all the information will be available on our website: www.oac.gov.om/oqn.



Nizamuddin Ahmad
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 Co-opted Member &
 Deputy Dean and Registrar,
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Importance of the Evaluation Report

The Oman Quality Network was established in 2006, with the intention of providing a forum for the sharing of ideas and practices related to quality management in higher education. Over the following two years, the Network orchestrated a series of workshops, given by staff of the former Oman Accreditation Council. The workshops informed the sector about important general principles of quality assurance and enhancement. With the commencement of Quality Audits in 2008/2009, the Network shifted the focus of its activities to subject-specific seminars related to the Audit. By late 2009, having completed several years of operations,

Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skilful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.

William A. Foster

it was timely for the Network to undergo its own external evaluation. The British Council (Muscat) was generous enough to provide funds for this exercise and, in early 2010, consultants from Remarkable Performance Ltd. (UK) conducted an intensive evaluation of the Network.

The Evaluation Report noted some areas of strength, but primarily identified specific areas of the Network's operations as needing remedial action, beginning with the OQN's Mission Statement and including its funding strategy and legal status. Many of these areas were the past subject of exhaustive decisions and exploratory actions by the Network's Executive Committee, but without



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successful resolution. The Evaluation Report highlights the importance of continuing to pursue these issues until they are resolved. Ultimately, the success or failure of the OQN is dependent on the level of contribution of its members. As stated in the OQN's current Mission, "the Members will collaborate to build on their collective strengths for the benefit of the higher education sector". The Network has the potential to become a premier professional body in quality assurance in higher education across the region, once its members become fully engaged in its operations. Hopefully, the Evaluation Report will provide guideposts to facilitate that engagement.



OQN Executive Committee



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