

INQAAHE Conference 2013

Managing diversity: sustainable quality assurance processes

Sub-theme 1: The QA of cross-border education: from quality providers to quality assured provision

Topic: Sharing responsibility for QA: role of the QA agency from the home country and that of the agency in the receiving country

Audio-visual requirements: ppt presentation

Title

Academic affiliations between foreign and Omani higher education institutions: learning from OAAA quality audits

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Abstract (100-150 words)

There has been considerable growth in Oman's higher education sector since the early 1980's in order to meet the nation's human capital needs. This paper considers the development of this sector, particularly in the area of foreign academic affiliation agreements. All private university colleges and colleges are expected to have an affiliate in order to be licensed to operate. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) is now carrying out the first cycle of quality audits which has provided an opportunity to review the effectiveness of the affiliation agreements in place. A consideration of the findings of the OAAA quality audit reports highlights the diversity of the partnerships in place as well as the impact of these in terms of effectiveness and fulfilling the original intention.

Paper outline

Since the early 1980's, the Sultanate of Oman has developed a diverse system of public higher education, with the establishment of teacher training colleges, technical colleges, health institutes and a national university in 1986. Private sector provision of higher education in Oman began in 1995. This was encouraged by the government in order to meet the growing demand for higher education in response to a significant growth in the number of school leavers: from around 2000 in 1983 to over 46,000 in 2009 (MoNE, 2010). In the absence of any comprehensive, independent, national external quality assurance systems being in place at this time, this initiative was accompanied by legislation requiring all private university colleges and colleges to have an affiliation agreement with an international institution. According to Ministerial Decision 34/2000, private university and colleges (although not universities) were expected to have their award certificates ratified by the academic affiliate. The intention was for the international affiliation to serve as a mechanism by which the standards and quality of private higher education in Oman would be assured. In 2012, there are 26 private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operating in Oman with a wide range of affiliation agreements in place, with "sending" (UNESCO, 2005) countries including the UK, USA, Australia, Austria, Germany, India, Jordan,

Lebanon and the Netherlands (Razvi and Carroll, 2007). A network of public HEIs has also had an affiliation agreement with a consortium from New Zealand to support its transition from Colleges of Education to Colleges of Applied Sciences.

Private HEIs are licensed and supervised by a Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges, part of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). In 2001, the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) was established, becoming the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) in 2010. The OAAA, which is fully independent from the MoHE, is now in the process of implementing a two-stage institutional accreditation system - Quality Audit followed by Standards Assessment - applicable to private and public HEIs. Thirty quality audit reports have now been published. In alignment with the UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education Provision¹ (2005), this process includes formal scrutiny of the effectiveness of institutional affiliations for programs and quality assurance in supporting HEIs in meeting their strategic aims. With reference to the literature on transnational (or cross-border) education, this paper provides the opportunity to report on an analysis of the findings of the OAAA quality audits on the effectiveness of a range of affiliation agreements in Oman. Although the number of branch campuses is very limited, there are a number of different types of provision of foreign higher education in Oman including the familiar models of franchised programs and validated programs with awards being made by the sending country, along with a number of diverse and specifically tailored affiliation agreements.

While analysis of quality audit findings in relation to cross border education has been carried out in a sending country (Stella and Bhushan, 2011), the findings of the quality audits in Oman provides a perspective on the experiences of a “receiving” country. Since 2008, 19 of the 26 private HEIs in Oman have been through quality audit and the resulting audit reports highlight the great diversity of affiliation agreements between HEIs in Oman and their international partners and the varying impact these affiliations have had on institutions. Previous research in the Omani higher education context suggests that a dependence on foreign affiliations can be problematic (Chapman et al, 2009; Al Lamki, 2006) but this view has not necessarily been supported by the findings of the quality audits.

The introduction of quality audits in Oman has been considered in a number of earlier papers (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2012; Sharieh, 2011; Carroll et al, 2009). The emphasis of quality audit is on ‘fitness for purpose’, evaluating the effectiveness of an institution’s quality assurance and quality enhancement processes against its stated goals and objectives. The quality audit process involves the submission of a self-review Portfolio which includes in its scope the requirement for HEIs to describe and evaluate the effectiveness of their affiliation agreements with foreign HEIs that impact upon the provision of their programs or their operations generally (OAC, 2008). The Panel convened to carry out the quality audit will typically review the affiliation agreement, examine visit reports and carry out interviews with affiliate representatives with responsibilities for the partnership at different levels. HEI staff and students are also interviewed. The resulting audit reports are published on the OAAA website and contain formal conclusions:

¹ “Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include cross-border education provision in its various modes” p.19

Commendations, where an HEI is doing something particularly well; Affirmations, where an HEI has recognised an opportunity for improvement and is taking steps to address this; and Recommendations where the Panel has identified an issue that requires significant attention.

A review of the formal conclusions in the quality audit reports in areas relating to affiliation partnerships has indicated that some arrangements are more effective than others. This has been the case where the receiving HEI has benefited from adopting (and adapting) the sending HEI's quality assurance systems such as the use of external examiners and the endorsement of student results by the appropriate bodies. However, the report findings also highlight the great diversity in the extent to which agreements are implemented effectively and the extent to which the affiliation agreements are contributing to the quality assurance of academic standards. An analysis of the first 25 quality audit reports found that although 40% of the audited HEIs received Recommendations on the need to improve affiliation agreements, over 50% of private HEIs received a Commendation in the area of institutional affiliations for programs and quality assurance (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2012). The features of a successful affiliation included having a positive impact on the development and implementation of academic quality assurance systems; in the professional development of teaching staff and in the assessment and moderation of examinations. Less successful affiliations have highlighted the importance of all stakeholders having a clear and consistent understanding of the purpose of an agreement and the need to ensure that imported programs are contextualised for Omani students. Overall, the quality audit reports show that some affiliations are fulfilling the original purpose of assuring standards and quality and in some cases, bringing additional benefits such as supporting HEIs to develop and become independent. In other cases, the findings show that affiliations are not serving the quality assurance needs of the HEI and call into question the sending HEI's motivation for entering into the agreement in the first place. There are also examples where an HEI in Oman has entered into an agreement with an affiliate solely to fulfill the MoHE requirement and has developed other mechanisms to assure the quality of its awards.

Fundamentally, the issue is whether overseas partnerships are supporting the legitimacy, recognition and mobility (Knight, 2010) of the awards being made in Oman. As a quality assurance agency, OAAA needs to use the findings of this analysis to inform improvements to the system, such as a closer scrutiny of the affiliation agreements at the licensing stage; and encouraging receiving HEIs to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the relationships themselves. The results will also inform the development of institutional and program standards. This paper will conclude that as the higher education system in Oman matures, effective foreign affiliation partnerships will continue to have an important role to play in such a diverse system where they support the national objectives for HEIs in Oman to meet international standards.

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