

## **Session 3-1**

### **A Two-tiered Quality Assurance Approach: The Case of Colleges of Technology in Oman**

**Rolando M. Lontok Jr.**

Ph.D.

Member, Quality Assurance Committee

Nizwa College of Technology

Sultanate of Oman

#### **Abstract**

When Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and Oman Ministry of Higher Education started standardising the quality management system of higher education institutions in the country by drafting the *Requirements for Omani System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* [1] and the *Plan for an Omani Higher Education Quality Management System* [2], colleges of technology in the country also embarked on establishing their own approach to quality assurance and enhancement by adopting a management scheme that allowed individual colleges in the system to take initiatives regarding the establishment of quality processes best-fitted for each college's environment while at the same time centrally aggregating best practices of all colleges to come up with uniform standards for common activities in the system. It is deemed that through this approach, each college within the system would develop its own unique quality culture while at the same time establish standards for common processes for all seven colleges in support of the government's national quality agenda. The result is what the author calls a 'two-tiered QA approach', where a central Quality Assurance Department established in the Ministry of Manpower is complemented by a local Quality Assurance Unit in each of the seven colleges to establish a QA scheme that is both unique in every college and standard for the whole system.

This paper discusses the details of such an approach, emphasising on the roles played by the two QA units mentioned, the responsibilities that evolved through implementing the said approach, the issues encountered, and the lessons learned. The author also puts emphasis on why this setup benefitted the colleges of technology system in Oman, as well as future strategic directions that the system can adopt in further improving said scheme based on changes happening in higher education environment in the Sultanate.

## **The system**

The colleges of technology is a system of higher technological education in the Sultanate of Oman, operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Manpower. Colleges in the system offer diploma, advanced diploma and bachelor degrees in various specializations of Engineering, IT and Business Studies. The colleges of technology is one of the biggest higher education systems in the Sultanate [3], with no less than 35,000 active students and a plan to add an additional 20,000 starting 2015. The colleges of technology system is comprised of seven colleges: the Higher College of Technology in the country capital Muscat, and six Colleges of Technology located in Musanna, Nizwa, Ibra, Ibri, Shinas and Salalah, which allow the system to have a presence in practically all areas of the country. Currently, all colleges are governed by the Board of Trustees (BoT) through the Director General of Technological Education. The BoT is chaired by the Minister of Manpower. However, the day-to-day management of operations of individual colleges rests on a BoT-appointed local College Dean.

## **The QA units**

To implement QA-related policies drafted by the BoT, the Ministry of Manpower established the Quality Assurance Department (QAD) with the responsibility of ensuring that colleges conform to the national and ministry-based QA policies and standards. The QAD is headed by a QA Director who reports to the Undersecretary of Technological Education and to the BoT. Other members of the QAD are called “QA Specialists”, and they provide guidance and support to various colleges of technology in their implementation of QA assurance and enhancement activities. Their primary task is to conduct regular QA reviews and audits to the colleges in the system.

Each college on the other hand has a Quality Assurance Unit [4] that is composed of the college Quality Assurance Committee and the College QA Executive (or Follow-up) Group. The college QA Committee is comprised of the Dean and Asst. Deans, and communicates directly with the QAD through the QA Director. The committee decides the roadmap for QA-related activities of the college. With support from the QAD, the QA Committee implements national and ministry-based QA policies and standards and drafts internal QA-related policies for the college. The QA Executive Group, meanwhile, executes and monitors the implementation of these various QA-related policies and standards. The QA Executive Group is headed by the college QA Officer with membership (or representations) from various college administrative and academic units.

From the formal establishment of the QAD, as well as the college QA Units in 2004, functions and responsibilities evolved throughout the years of implementing the two-tiered approach. Initially, the QAD's role is focused on helping colleges establish functional QA systems in their respective organizations and develop a culture of quality within the college community. Later on – especially during the time when colleges of technology went through the first stage of accreditation process – the QAD primarily served as internal auditors and reviewers of QA systems established in colleges, preparing them for OAAA audit and supporting them to establish monitoring and data collection schemes to ensure adherence to QA policies and standards. In the current scenario where college QA units already become matured, the QAD serves mainly as “consultants” on how colleges can further improve their systems. The QAD is also more focused now in making sure that colleges practice more uniform processes in terms of major and common operational matters.

For its part, the college QA unit evolved from a mere follow-up unit – implementing various QA standards and policies provided to it by the QA Committee – to a more active player in college activities, establishing and streamlining systems, and having more teeth in making sure policies and procedures are followed. To ensure effective performance of its functions, the QA Executive Group of each college coordinates and works with the departmental QA Sub-committees, as well as the various Self-assessment Working Groups in order to ensure continuous and effective implementation of policies and programs. The self-assessment working groups primarily work to collect data and write assessment reports for each of the eight QA scope as identified by the OAAA. The college QA Executive Group coordinates all actions of these various groups and sub-committees, as well as other college permanent committees such as Risk Management and Health & Safety, to ensure effective implementation of all college systems and processes. The group also monitors and reviews all units to ensure they conform to QA standards.

### **Benefits of the approach**

As the colleges of technology operate under the Ministry of Manpower, this approach helps each individual college to have a direct connection to the Ministry on matters pertaining to policies and other guidelines promulgated by the BoT. In this regard, the QAD plays a major role being the conduit between the Ministry and the colleges in interpreting and implementing policies and guidelines effectively.

Another important benefit of this approach is that there is a readily available support every time the colleges need expert advice on matters pertaining to QA and policy management. This enabled the colleges to quickly adapt to new changes in

policy and to quickly establish and nurture their own policy management schemes which are very essential in coming up with matured college systems. Aside from this, the QAD also plays a very important role in sharing best practices among colleges, as excellent processes that they observe from auditing the colleges are shared with colleges which are still weak in those areas so that they could follow the same path. In this case, all colleges benefit from individual best practices, which in the long term, provides huge benefits and improvements to the whole system.

### **Lessons learned**

Throughout the almost seven years of implementing this approach, colleges in the system learned the following lessons:

- Having a two-tiered QA “filter” ensures better adherence to policies and standards, as review is done in two layers: first is done local to the college, while the second is done from the point of view of the whole system through the QAD;
- A central body such as the QAD helps in making sure that best practice in one college is shared with other colleges so that all members of the system enjoy the best implementation of important procedures to best serve various stakeholders;
- Functions and roles of QA units evolve based on maturing QA systems;
- Having two levels of audits and having a body that supports in the preparation of the college in accreditation provides better accreditation/audit outcomes;

### **Conclusion**

After years of implementing the approach, the colleges of technology system can say that the two-tiered QA approach worked successfully in its system. Some of the proofs of the success of this scheme include the development and implementation of two uniform strategic plans for the system that are customised in the colleges, the preparation and successful audit by OAAA of almost all colleges of technology to date, the sharing of best practices which resulted in the establishment of a common portal for all colleges of technology, and the maturing of college QA units through the continuous guidance and support of the QAD.

As the system evolves, roles and responsibilities change as well. The challenge now is for the system to adapt to these changes and sustain its success.

### **References**

- Oman Accreditation Council, 2004, “Requirements for Omani System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Oman Qualifications Framework”, Oman.

- Oman Accreditation Council, 2006, “Plan for an Omani Higher Education Quality Management System: The Quality Plan”, Oman.
- R. Lontok Jr. and A. Ghassani, “Towards Quality Higher Education in Oman: Implementing Quality Assurance in Colleges of Technology”, Proceedings of CIMQUSEF 2010 Conference, Morocco.
- Quality Assurance Follow-up Unit, 2010, “NCT Quality Assurance Manual” (Page 11), Nizwa, Oman.

## The poster

