

Session 1-1

Academic Affiliations between Foreign and Omani Higher Education Institutions: Learning from OAAA Quality Audits

Susan Trevor-Roper

Quality Assurance Expert, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Salim Razvi

CEO, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Tess Goodliffe

Quality Assurance Expert, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

Abstract

There has been considerable growth in Oman's higher education sector over the past three decades in order to meet the nation's human capital needs. Private higher education was encouraged in the mid-nineties to meet this need. All private colleges and university 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 – the first stage of the two-stage institutional accreditation process – which has provided an opportunity to review the effectiveness of the affiliation agreements in place. There is a diverse range of affiliation agreements in Oman, some of which are outside the usual typologies of transnational education (TNE). The findings of the OAAA quality audit reports suggest that while there may be a variety of affiliation relationships in the higher education sector in Oman, specific features of effective TNE models emerge which may have a valuable role to play in ensuring that all partnerships fulfill the original intention as a mechanism for assuring quality.

Introduction

With reference to the literature on transnational (also referred to as cross-border or offshore) education, this paper reports on an analysis of the findings of the OAAA quality audits regarding the effectiveness of a range of affiliation agreements in Oman. There are a number of different types of provision of foreign higher education in Oman which include a branch campus; various models of franchised programs and validated programs with awards being made by the “sending country” (UNESCO/OECD, 2005); affiliations with awards being made by Omani HEIs and quality assured by the foreign affiliate; as well as other specifically tailored affiliation agreements. The Omani HEIs involved in these partnerships cater to over 40% of the total number of students enrolled in higher education in Oman (HEAC, 2011).

This analysis provides the opportunity to review whether the affiliations, which in many cases were a legal requirement, have been effective in supporting “receiving” (UNESCO/OECD, 2005) HEIs in Oman in assuring academic standards and quality. The findings can also be used to improve the current regulations related to the affiliation agreements.

Context/Background

Since the early 1980’s, the Sultanate of Oman has developed a diverse system of public higher and post secondary 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 provision 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). The significance of the introduction of private higher education institutions (HEIs) was recognised in HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said’s speech to the Oman State Council in 2006:

We are pleased...to also express our satisfaction over...the establishment of private universities that include colleges offering diverse sciences and arts programs which are needed in the country and which meet the requirements of the labor market, which is the ultimate melting pot that absorbs the output of educational institutions...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. (HM Speech to the State Council, 14 November, 2006 www.statecouncil.om)

In the absence of any comprehensive, independent, national external quality assurance systems being in place in the nineties, this initiative was accompanied by

legislation requiring all private colleges and university colleges to have an affiliation agreement with an international institution. According to Ministerial Decision 34/2000, issued by the Minister of Higher Education, private HEIs (excluding universities) were expected to have their award certificates ratified by the academic affiliate. Initially private colleges were licensed to offer awards up to diploma¹ level. 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 (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2008). Currently there are 26 private HEIs operating in Oman with a wide range of affiliation agreements in place, with sending countries including the UK, USA, Australia, Austria, Germany, India, Jordan, Lebanon and the Netherlands. International affiliations have also been sought by public HEIs in Oman. In 2006, a network of public HEIs signed an affiliation agreement with a consortium from New Zealand to support its transition from Colleges of Education to Colleges of Applied Sciences (O'Rourke and Al Bulushi, 2010). The College of Banking and Financial Studies, Oman Tourism College (primarily government-funded) and the Institute of Health Sciences also have agreements with overseas affiliates. Some private universities in Oman have also entered into affiliation agreements, although they are not legally required to do so.

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 is the government body responsible for the accreditation of institutions and programs of public and private HEIs in Oman.

Modes of delivery of foreign higher education Oman

Education that crosses national borders has been referred to variously as transnational education (TNE), cross-border education, or offshore education (Knight, 2006). Cross-border education is defined as:

...higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, program, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. Cross-border education may include higher education by public/private and not-for-profit/for profit providers. It encompasses a wide range of modalities in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms from students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to distance learning (using a range of technologies and including e-learning) (UNESCO/OECD, 2005 p.9).

¹ According to the Oman Qualifications Framework (in ROSQA - see OAC, 2004) a diploma is equivalent to 240 credit points or 60 credit hours

While Omani ‘receiving’ colleges and university colleges are required to have affiliates, international research would suggest that there are a number of motivating factors for ‘sending’ HEIs to be involved in TNE. These factors include a desire for commercial return; an interest in having an increased cultural understanding of other nations; intellectual curiosity; an opportunity to internationalise the curriculum and rising to the challenge of working in cross cultural environments. It has been suggested that altruism, through national capacity-building or widening access to education in the receiving country can also be a motivating factor. TNE also provides opportunities for research collaboration and shared scholarship (Stella and Bhushan, 2011).

Guidelines on provision of transnational education have been developed at international level (such as UNESCO/OECD, 2005) and at national levels (such as the International Education Association of Australia, 2008) in an attempt to protect students and other stakeholders from poor education (although these are guidelines are therefore not legally binding). TNE provision has also been subject to scrutiny by the national quality agencies of a few of the sending countries (such as QAA in UK and AUQA, the former quality agency in Australia). TNE takes a number of different forms. Knight (2006) and Alleyne (2012) have provided typologies and characteristics of the various modes of delivery involved in TNE. While Oman has a number of these (indicated in Table 1) the typologies do not fully accommodate the range of affiliation agreements currently in operation in Oman. Table 1, based on the table cited in Alleyne (2012), offers additional modes² to reflect the variety of features of foreign higher education in Oman:

MODE	DEFINITION	Examples in Oman
Branch Campuses	Foreign institution establishes a subsidiary, either on its own or jointly with a local provider, and delivery is entirely by the foreign university, leading to a degree from the latter	✓ e.g. Arab Open University (not yet audited)
Double/Joint Degree	Students pursue a program jointly offered by institutions in two countries. The qualification(s) can be either a degree that is jointly awarded or two separate degrees awarded by each partner institution	✓ e.g. Oman College of Management and Technology (degree is awarded jointly)
Twinning	Students pursue part of the program at the domestic institution and part in the partner	✓ (proposed) e.g. Mazoon College’s

² These different modes in Oman are shown in shaded areas in table

	foreign institution. The degree is awarded by the foreign institution.	proposal to offer 2 years in Oman, 2 years in US affiliate
Twinning (localised)	This is a variation on the twinning model with the part delivered in Oman developed for the local context and validated by the affiliate with articulation to the foreign institution program; degree is awarded by affiliate	✓ e.g. International College of Engineering and Management
Franchised Program	Learning programs designed by the foreign provider (franchiser) and delivered in the domestic institution (franchisee). The Student receives the qualification of the franchiser institution. Variations range from “full” to “part” franchise.	✓ e.g. includes all MBAs offered by private colleges and university colleges
Validated Program	A program established in a local higher education institution as equivalent to its own, leading to the award of a qualification from the latter [sending country].	✓ e.g. Caledonian College of Engineering, Majan College, Middle East College of Information Technology
Distance/Open Learning (e-learning)	Course is through distance learning whether traditional or on-line and could be with a local partner or entirely foreign. “Open Learning” also signifies that the program does not have the normal academic entry requirements.	✓ e.g. Arab Open University (although has face to face component in Oman)
Affiliation for quality assurance	Diplomas and degrees issued by the local institution, signed by an authorized signatory in the foreign institution with varying level of quality assurance responsibilities	✓ e.g. Modern College of Business and Science, Bayan College
Affiliate as consultant	The foreign institution acting as advisor or consultant but the local HEI making the	✓ e.g. Al Buraimi

	awards	University College
--	--------	--------------------

Table 1 Characteristics of various modes of delivery of foreign higher education in Oman
(based on Basher (2007); Knight J (2006) cited in Alleyne 2012)

There are a number of formal bodies responsible for monitoring the quality of institutional affiliations in Oman: the MoHE (through the Directorate General for Private Universities and Colleges (DGPUC); the OAAA; and overseas external quality agencies.

Quality assurance of institutional affiliation in Oman

MoHE role

The MoHE controls the process for the licensing of private HEIs (which are finally approved by the Education Council) and licenses programs offered by private HEIs. One of the licensing requirements for private colleges and university colleges is that an academic affiliation agreement is established with an overseas institution which covers all academic programs offered (Wilkinson and Al Hajry, 2007). The involvement of overseas partners was seen as a mechanism to assure that programs and instruction of private HEIs in Oman were comparable to the affiliated institution (Ameen et al, 2010).

The MoHE has designed a standard academic affiliation agreement which prospective private colleges and university colleges are expected to include with their licensing proposal. Articles 2, 3 and 4 of the affiliation agreement deal with the areas of co-operation, scope of services and undertakings. Article 2 specifies that: *The parties to this agreement will co-operate closely in achieving the college objectives and in providing education for students on a higher education level.* The standard affiliation agreement also calls for the affiliate to *undertake to offer its best expertise and organizational experience in compliance with the highest international standards of theoretical and practical education* (cited in Wilkinson and Al Hajry, 2007, pp.169-170). While the standard affiliation agreement is offered as a template, private colleges and university colleges have the right to add articles and points in these agreements to reflect what each particular institution seeks from the affiliation in terms of its mission and vision (Al-Harthy, 2011).

The MoHE's DGPUC undertakes annual visits to the private HEIs in order to review whether HEIs are currently applying the relevant legislation and regulations. DGPUC staff members meet senior administrators, teaching staff and students and the visit results in a report addressed to the Vice Chancellor or Dean of the HEI. While Al Harthy suggests that this approach *cannot be considered as a 'genuine' method or*

mechanism of quality assurance (2011, p.197), these reports have been used by the MoHE to decide on the distribution of internal scholarships to private HEIs (Al Harthy, 2011). In some cases, the DGPUC also receives reports from affiliates forwarded by private colleges and university colleges which provide feedback on the effectiveness of affiliation agreements.

OAAA role

The first iteration of institutional standards for Omani HEIs can be found in the Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA) (OAC, 2004) which included standards on *Partnership Arrangements*. The OAAA 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-one quality audit reports have now been published on the OAAA website (<http://www.oaaa.gov.om>).

The quality audit scope includes a section on *Institutional Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance* in the area of governance and management. The quality audit considers the effectiveness of an HEI's affiliation agreement(s) with foreign HEIs, and the impact of these affiliations upon the provision of their programs is evaluated. This is in alignment with the UNESCO/OECD guidelines³ (2005) which calls for external quality assurance processes to include formal scrutiny of the effectiveness of institutional affiliations for programs and quality assurance in supporting HEIs in meeting their strategic aims. The second stage of the institutional accreditation process, Standards Assessment, will involve assessment of HEIs against institutional standards related to academic affiliation. Program Accreditation will also involve the assessment of the effectiveness of affiliation agreements that impact upon the provisions of programs.

Role of national quality agencies in sending countries

A number of national agencies in sending countries, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK and the former Australian Universities Quality Agency, carry out visits to overseas HEIs that have affiliation agreements with HEIs in their jurisdiction. However, these audits focus on the activities of the affiliate in the sending country rather than the activities of the receiving HEI, and, to date, only the QAA has visited HEIs in Oman. However, according to Martin and Stella (2007) while sending HEIs involved in overseas affiliations may be subject to regulation in

³ *Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include cross-border education provision in its various modes* (UNESCO/OECD, 2005, p.19)

their own countries, the main responsibility for the provision of higher education lies with the receiving country.

Previous research findings on affiliations in Oman

While analysis of quality audit findings in relation to cross border education has been carried out in a sending country (such as Stella and Bhushan, 2011), the findings of the quality audits in Oman provides a perspective on the experiences of a “receiving” country. Most of the previous research relating to the effectiveness (and impact on quality of HE provision) of academic affiliations between Omani HEIs and international universities has relied primarily on literature reviews, surveys and interviews with relevant stakeholders (Wilkinson and Al Hajri, 2007; Ameen *et al*, 2010; Al Barwani *et al*, 2010; Al Harthy, 2011; Al Shmeli 2011). This research would suggest that there is little agreement among authors regarding the effectiveness and impact of the academic affiliations on the higher education provision in Oman. However, there are a number of key findings that emerge from this research.

Firstly, it has been suggested that academic affiliation cannot be relied on as the only mechanism to support quality education in private HEIs. Recognising that all private colleges in Oman have affiliation agreements with international universities, Al-Lamki posited:

Experience from other countries has shown that while privatization of higher education helped meet the swelling demand for tertiary education, provided access to many more students, and created diversification; they also brought along problems of funding and declining quality. (Al Lamki, 2006, p.71)

Al Lamki also stated that *this is not the time for the Omani government to disinvest in higher education and relinquish its responsibility to the perils of private sector* (Al Lamki, 2006, p.74). Such mistrust of higher education provision by private HEIs is not exclusive to Oman. Countries such as India have viewed TNE providers as profit-seeking, low-quality institutions with a sole focus on revenue generation. However, in contrast, receiving countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong are not resisting TNE but considering how to look at quality issues:

There is an understanding that exported higher education is not inherently a threat, and may in fact be a major assistance and benefit... countries...have realised that there are ways to protect the interests of both parties and they see quality assurance and collaboration as the best way to do that (Stella and Bhushan, 2011, p.248).

The risks and benefits of overseas affiliations have been recognised in the wider international context, where appropriate policies and regulations to guide and monitor the development of TNE have been called for (Knight, 2006). While the academic

affiliation is a supporting factor in ensuring the quality of higher education provision, it is not the sole determinant. Al Harthy (2011) found that it was not appropriate to have a total reliance on academic affiliation to ensure quality, as is the case for private universities colleges and colleges in Oman. He stated that:

...foreign universities mostly focus on the quality of contents of programs and courses. However, the issues are how these programs are delivered, and whether these institutions provide adequate resources (e.g. libraries, laboratories, classrooms, etc) for delivering these courses. All these issues and others should be guaranteed by the local authorities, Ministry of Higher Education and above all Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) (Al Harthy, 2011, p.322)

Secondly, the requirement for an academic affiliation provided support for quality assurance with varying levels of effectiveness:

In the absence of a national accrediting mechanism, this affiliation system provided a system of quality assurance...In some institutions, the affiliation system worked well. The affiliate was attentive, involved and committed to quality assurance and improvement. Other affiliates, however, took a more relaxed approach to the arrangement, and the quality assurance was weak. (Ameen et al, 2010).

As Knight (2010) notes, the huge potential of cross-border education needs to be acknowledged but not at the expense of academic quality and the integrity of the awards made. It is difficult to assess the quality of franchised programs without having an effective external quality assurance system. Through the setting of high standards by an external accreditation body such as the OAAA, *the level of domestic programmes will automatically be influenced by the need to compete where necessary (Wilkinson and Al Hajry, 2007, p.177).* Although it is difficult to measure the influence of external standards, *it is clear that the operation of the [OAAA], by enforcing uniform standards for domestic as well as foreign programmes, will ensure that the quality of programmes and their delivery is maintained at a high standard (Wilkinson and Al Hajry, 2007, p.177).*

While earlier research provides a useful perspective on the views of affiliation agreements in Oman, this paper offers the first opportunity to use the evidence from the findings from quality audit reports to analyse the effectiveness of the implementation of these agreements.

Quality audit of institutional affiliations for programs and quality assurance

The introduction of quality audits as the first stage of the OAAA's institutional accreditation process has been considered in a number of earlier papers (Razvi and Carroll, 2007; Carroll *et al*, 2009; Sharieh, 2011; Goodliffe and Razvi, 2012). 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-study 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). HEIs are encouraged to use an evidence-based method (ADRI⁴) in the self-review of their institutional affiliations. During quality audit, the OAAA audit panel also uses ADRI as an analytical tool to externally evaluate the effectiveness of the affiliation and to verify the HEI's claims in its Portfolio. The scope of the institutional affiliation review covers types and operational aspects of agreements with foreign HEIs and accreditation bodies that impact upon the local HEI's provision of programs or its operations generally. This is done by examination of affiliation agreements; review of affiliate and MoHE visit reports and HEIs’ action plans in response to these reports; saturation and triangulation of evidence; interviews with affiliate representatives with responsibilities for the partnerships at different levels and interviews with HEI representatives and students. The resulting audit reports are published on the OAAA website and contain formal conclusions: 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. OAAA findings are presented in the quality audit reports which are followed up by the responsible ministry. OAAA considers the HEI's response to formal conclusions as part of the second stage of institutional accreditation - Standards Assessment - process.

Audit report findings

This study is based on the findings of the first 30 formal OAAA quality audits which were conducted between 2008 and 2012 (types and numbers are shown in Table 2). HEIs audited included colleges, university colleges and universities as defined under Oman’s institutional classification system which is set out in ROSQA (OAC, 2004).

Type of HEI	Public	Private	Total
University	1	3	4

⁴ ADRI – Approach; Deployment; Results and Improvement: see *Quality Audit Manual* (OAC, 2008) p.73 for further explanation

University College	0	4 ⁵	4
College	9	13	22
Total	10	20	30

Table 2 Number and type of HEIs which underwent quality audits in Oman between 2008 and 2012.

Seventeen of the audited HEIs are classified and licensed as either a private college (13 in total) or a private university college (four in total) and are required to be affiliated to a foreign HEI. Although this requirement does not apply to public HEIs or private HEIs classified and licensed as universities, the first 30 quality audits also included four public colleges and two private universities which have chosen to establish academic affiliation agreements with foreign HEIs.

The number of foreign HEIs affiliated with Omani HEIs is not a simple one-to-one ratio as some Omani HEIs have more than one affiliate. Amongst the first 30 Omani HEIs to undergo quality audit were a total of 23 institutions which are affiliated to 27 foreign HEIs from eight different countries (as shown in Table 3).

Type of HEI	No. of HEIs with Foreign Affiliates	No. of Affiliates	Countries Represented
Private College	13	15	UK (England), UK (Scotland), India, Australia, USA, Lebanon, Jordan, Austria
Private University College	4	5	UK (England), UK (Scotland), India, Australia, USA
Private University	2	2	Australia, Lebanon
Public College	4	5	UK (Scotland), UK (England), Jordan, New Zealand
Total	23	27	8

Table 3 Number and type of HEIs which underwent quality audits in Oman between 2008 and 2012 which are affiliated to foreign HEIs.

⁵ Shaded areas denote HEIs that are required to have an affiliation

General Findings

The quality audit reports show that there is considerable variation in the nature of different academic affiliation agreements operating in Oman and the impact that they have on quality assurance. All except two of the 23 audited HEIs which have affiliates received at least one formal conclusion in the quality audit report area focusing on international affiliations for programs and quality assurance. This indicates the importance of affiliation agreements and the attention paid to them by the quality audit panels. In addition, a number of formal conclusions in other areas of these audit reports relate specifically to the impact of the affiliate. This demonstrates the impact of foreign affiliates across different areas of institutional activity.

In terms of positive impact, ten out of 23 (over 43%) of the audited institutions which have foreign affiliates received Commendations on these affiliations⁶. For the private colleges and university colleges, which are formally required to have an affiliate, seven out of the 17 institutions received Commendations (over 41%). In terms of opportunities for improvement, 11 out of the 23 (over 47%) of the audited institutions which have foreign affiliates received one or more Recommendations about their affiliations. For the private colleges and university colleges, nine out of the 17 institutions received Recommendations (over 52 %).

Type of HEI	No. of HEIs with Foreign Affiliates	Number of Conclusions for International Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance.		
		Commendations	Affirmations	Recommendations
Private College	13	5	1	9
Private University College	4	2	0	3
Private University	2	2	0	0
Public College	4	1	1	2
Total	23	10	2	14

Table 4 Formal conclusions for International Affiliations for Program and Quality Assurance for HEIs affiliated to foreign HEIs which underwent quality audit in Oman between 2008 and 2012

⁶ One of the audited HEIs received a Commendation in the area of *Institutional Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance* with respect to its relationships with other HEIs but as it has no formal affiliation with an overseas provider. This Commendation has not been included in these statistics.

As indicated in Table 4 above, in the 23 published Audit Reports of HEIs which have affiliation agreements with foreign HEIs, there are ten Commendations, two Affirmations and 14 Recommendations in the section on international affiliations for programs and quality assurance. The reports of the 17 private HEIs in this group which are formally required to be affiliated to foreign HEIs include seven Commendations, one Affirmation and 12 Recommendations. With a Commendation representing an “an instance of particularly good practice” (OAC, 2008, p.88) and a Recommendation representing a “significant opportunity for improvement” (OAC, 2008, p.90), the profile of formal conclusions demonstrates the range of impact of different affiliate relationships in existence.

Findings from Commendations

Within the quality audit scope area which focuses on international affiliations for programs and quality assurance, the quality audit panels found affiliation agreements which had a significantly positive impact on the development and implementation of quality assurance systems, benchmarking and enhancement of standards in the Omani HEIs. Amongst private colleges and university colleges required to have an affiliate, this is exemplified in the following Commendations:

- *The OAAA commends XXX for its long-standing relationship with XXX through which strong oversight of quality assurance on the XXX programme is provided.*
- *The OAC commends XXX for developing an effective relationship with XXX which has had a positive impact on the development of quality assurance systems and benchmarking of its programmes.*

A clear example of affiliate-supported local capacity building is shown in the following Commendation:

- *The OAAA commends XXX for developing an ongoing sustainable relationship with XXX to establish institutional processes and standards that should enable it to progress its ambition to award its own degrees.*

Commendations in this area have also been given to HEIs which have chosen to have an academic affiliate:

- *The OAAA commends XXX for its well-established affiliations with XXX which directly support its Mission [to provide internationally accredited education and training programmes ...]*
- *The OAAA commends XXX for the success of its affiliate relationship with XXX in providing educational opportunities for students and producing graduates to meet the...needs in Oman.*

Commendations associated directly with foreign affiliates were also found in other areas covered by the audits. Specifically these related to assessment, teaching

and learning and the professional development of staff in private colleges and university colleges.

Examples include:

- *The OAAA commends XXX for its provision of programs delivered in affiliation with XXX for which robust systems for assessment and moderation are implemented.*
- *The OAAA commends XXX for the innovative teaching and learning environment including the adoption and use of Secure OnLine Environment ([the affiliate's] digitally enhanced learning environment) in meeting the particular learning needs of...students.*
- *The OAAA commends XXX for introducing the Post Graduate Certificate [offered by the affiliate] in Higher Education Practice to support the professional development of its staff.*

The Commendations above relate to institutions where the foreign affiliate has a strong presence and, typically, effort is made to ensure that quality assurance systems relating to academic programs are applied in the HEI in Oman with the same rigour as in the foreign affiliate. Within some affiliations, additional benefit to the Omani HEI is provided through, for example, the secondment of senior staff from the affiliate and support in recruitment of academic staff; affiliate supported professional development of staff from the Omani HEI which may include visits to the affiliate; affiliate supported development of academic programs to meet the specific needs of Oman; affiliate supported access to and development of teaching resources; and affiliate supported development of the local HEI towards become independent of the affiliate for the quality assurance of programs.

Of eleven Commendations received by private colleges and university colleges which relate explicitly to their academic affiliate (under the quality audit report section on *Institutional Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance* or in other sections of the report), it is noteworthy that nine of these (more than 80% of the total Commendations) relate to affiliations where the affiliate is the awarding body. A number of these affiliation agreements are, broadly, franchise agreements some of which allow for the development and validation of new programs at the Omani HEI. Under these agreements there is typically strong oversight of the partnership from the affiliate, and in the cases of UK based affiliates, also indirect oversight by the QAA. However, the audits revealed an opportunity for improvement for local HEIs in their own monitoring and evaluation of these relationships and a number were encouraged by the OAAA to implement a system to do this.

Findings from Recommendations

Over 47% of the audited HEIs which have foreign affiliates received at least one Recommendation in the quality audit scope area which focuses on international affiliations for programs and quality assurance. In these cases, attention was found to be required in relation to, for example, policies and processes for establishing an affiliate; clarity of the affiliate roles and responsibilities; communication with the affiliate; systems for quality assurance of programs; follow-up on affiliates' reports; and periodic review of affiliation agreements and their implementation. Amongst private colleges and university colleges required to have an affiliate, these are exemplified in the following Recommendations:

- a) Policies and processes for establishing an affiliate:
 - *The OAAA recommends that XXX develop and implement policies and rigorous processes (including due diligence) for establishing new academic affiliate relationships.*
- b) Clarity of the affiliate roles and responsibilities:
 - *The OAAA recommends XXX, in conjunction with XXX clearly define their respective responsibilities for assuring the academic standards of the programs covered by the scope of the affiliation agreement and then establish quality systems to ensure that these standards can be met.*
 - *The OAAA recommends that XXX clarify the formal roles and responsibilities of the College and its academic affiliate for undergraduate programs, XXX, in relation to awards, the assurance of academic standards and the ownership of curriculum, and communicate these effectively to all stakeholders.*
- c) Communication with the affiliate:
 - *The OAAA recommends that XXX establish clear channels of communication with its academic affiliates at appropriate levels in the College in accordance with the roles and responsibilities of different relevant stakeholders*
- d) Systems for quality assurance of programs:
 - *The OAAA recommends that XXX regularly review its own academic quality assurance management systems, in collaboration with its affiliate, in order to ensure that they support an effective learning and teaching environment.*
- e) Follow-up on affiliates' reports:
 - *The OAAA recommends that XXX ensure that reports from its main academic affiliate XXX, are formally considered by all relevant stakeholders in the HEI as part of a system to support quality assurance and improvement*

- f) Periodic review of affiliation agreements and their implementation:
- *The OAAA recommends that XXX review its academic affiliation agreement with XXX and the implementation of this to ensure that the HEI is appropriately supported in fulfilling its Mission*

Of the four public colleges which have chosen to have affiliates only two of those (which are part of a network) received Recommendations – one in relation to the follow-up on affiliate reports and one in relation to systems for quality assurance of programs. Amongst private colleges and university colleges required to have an affiliate, Recommendations associated directly with foreign affiliates were also found in other areas covered by the audits. Specifically these related to contextualization of curricula and assessment.

Examples include:

- *The OAAA recommends that XXX develop a consistent process for the contextualisation of imported curricula for Oman and establish mechanisms for the regular review of programs.*
- *The OAAA recommends that XXX implement a formal, clear and consistent process for the regular review and revision of the curricula across all its academic programs which incorporates feedback from its main academic affiliate, XXX, students and other relevant stakeholders in order to ensure its programs effectively support development of appropriate and relevant knowledge and skills for students in Oman*
- *The OAAA recommends that XXX, as a matter of priority and with the support of its affiliate, develop and implement robust moderation processes for its assessment, that it ensure common assessment tasks are clearly linked to the learning outcomes, and that it develop rigorous policies in order to implement clearly identified standards of student achievement for all its courses*

The Recommendations above relate to HEIs where, typically, the foreign affiliate has a relatively weak and unsystematic presence and where there is no explicit effort made to ensure that quality assurance systems relating to academic programs are applied with the same rigour as in the foreign affiliate. In some cases this stems from the nature of the academic affiliation agreement itself. Further, in a number of cases there is a lack of clarity among stakeholders about the purpose that the affiliation is actually serving. The quality audits also highlight one case where a private HEI entered into an affiliation agreement with an overseas HEI to satisfy the formal requirement (and received a Recommendation in relation to this affiliation) but in fact worked in partnership with an International Advisory Board to manage the quality assurance of its provision.

A number of affiliate relationships which received Recommendations had a particular focus on the provision of curricula by the affiliate. However, the audits often revealed a lack of effective processes to ensure appropriate contextualisation of curricula for Oman.

Typically these agreements involved what was described to audit panels as “consultancy” whereby the affiliates produced reports on a range of the local HEIs’ activities. However, the audits revealed that these reports are not necessarily addressed effectively by the local HEI. The audits highlighted that affiliations based on the provision of curricula and consultancy are not necessarily effective in assuring standards of student attainment as the affiliate may have little or no input into assessment processes.

Of the 18 Recommendations received by private colleges and university colleges which relate explicitly to their academic affiliate (under the quality audit report section on *Institutional Affiliations for Programs and Quality Assurance* or in other sections of the report), it is noteworthy that over two thirds of these relate to affiliations where academic awards for the programs are made by the local Omani HEI with some kind of “attestation” by the affiliate. This is in clear contrast to the affiliations discussed above where the academic awards are conferred by the affiliate. The audits revealed a lack of clarity and common understanding among stakeholders over award certificates which were issued by the Omani HEI and signed by the affiliate; in most cases the affiliate’s signature did not relate to an endorsement of the achievement of the particular student named on the award; rather, typically it signified that the local HEI had an academic affiliation of some kind with the local HEI.

Discussion and conclusions

The OAAA Quality Audits have allowed the first systematic analysis of the international affiliation agreements operating in Oman. One of the concerns of previous research is that implementing an affiliation system as a mechanism for quality assurance in private HEIs in Oman works well only in some cases (Ameen *et al*, 2010). This study supports this broad conclusion to some extent; a review of the formal conclusions in the quality audit reports in the areas relating to affiliation partnerships has indicated that some arrangements are more effective than others. The audits have also provided an opportunity to identify specific opportunities for improvement and strengths in existing affiliate relationships. Furthermore, this study includes both private colleges and university colleges which are required to have a foreign affiliate as well as public and private HEIs which have chosen voluntarily to affiliate with foreign HEIs.

This study considered the first 30 OAAA quality audit reports which included 23 HEIs with foreign affiliates. Of these, 17 of the HEIs are private colleges and university colleges which are formally required to have an affiliate. Seven of these 17 (over 41%) received Commendations for their affiliation and nine (over 52%) received Recommendations. The remaining six (of the 23) HEIs which have chosen to have international affiliations include two private universities which both received Commendations for their affiliations and four public colleges, one of which received a Commendation and two of which received Recommendations in relation to their affiliations.

Effectiveness of affiliations in Oman

The features of a successful affiliation identified included the affiliation having a direct impact on the development and implementation of quality assurance systems; on benchmarking and enhancement of standards; in the professional development of teaching staff and in assessment. Effective affiliation agreements have been found in cases where the receiving HEI has benefited from adopting (and adapting) the sending HEI's quality assurance systems. However, the quality audit report findings also highlight diversity in the extent to which agreements are implemented effectively and the extent to which the affiliation agreements are contributing to the assurance of academic standards and quality. Less successful affiliations have highlighted the importance of Omani HEIs needing appropriate policies and processes for establishing an affiliate and for the nature of the affiliation agreements themselves to be appropriate. Within such agreements, the respective roles of the affiliate and the Omani HEI need to be clear to all stakeholders. Effective communication with affiliates is required to support implementation of agreements as well as systems to ensure that affiliates' reports are considered and responded to effectively. Affiliations need to support the development of curricula that are appropriately contextualized with robust assessment practices. Periodic review of affiliation agreements and their implementation is also required.

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 the affiliations are not serving the quality assurance needs of the HEI and call into question the sending HEIs motivation for entering into the agreement in the first place. The findings also call for the need to review the current MoHE affiliation requirement to ensure that it is fit for purpose. This paper suggests that the impact of international affiliations can be viewed in terms of a continuum where at one end not only are academic standards assured but the foreign

affiliate brings considerable added value in terms of the development of the Omani HEI and the experience of its students. At the opposing end of the continuum, the affiliation does not assure academic standards and brings little value to the local HEI, with the potential to mislead the stakeholders. The quality audit reports and the formal conclusions in particular, allow features and practices to be identified to illustrate this continuum.

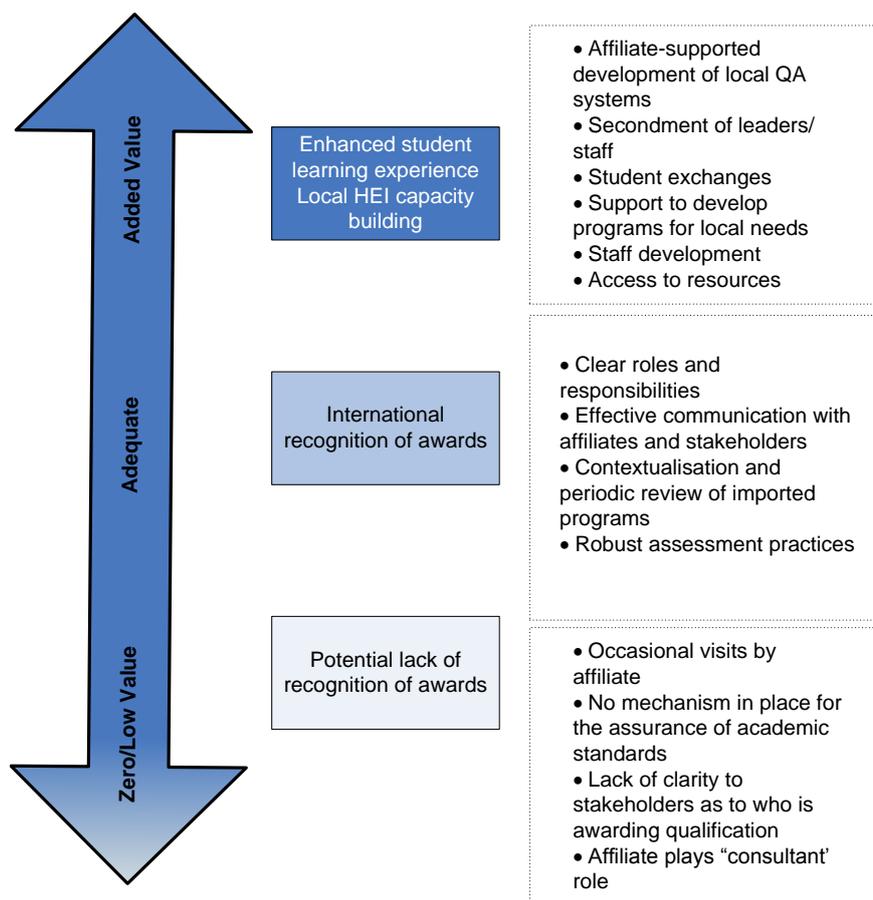


Figure 1 Value continuum of impact of foreign affiliations in Oman

This continuum recognizes the fundamental issue of whether overseas partnerships are supporting the legitimacy, recognition and mobility (Knight, 2010) of the awards being made in Oman.

Diversity in types of affiliations

The study has revealed diversity in the types of affiliations operating in Oman. The affiliates themselves are from a range of countries which bring a range of higher educational systems to Oman. These operate in different modes and the audits reveal that the nature of a given affiliate relationship may change over time (as the local HEI develops, for example). The range of affiliation agreements and the

diversity of higher education provision in Oman have previously been described as a “hodgepodge of curricula and operating systems” (Al Barwani et al, 2010) and greater coherence has been called for. However, this paper suggests that such diversity *per se* is not problematic. Rather than encouragement of a “one size fits all” approach, the study suggests that focus is required on ensuring that affiliations are fit for purpose and encouraging “added value” features.

The findings of the study do indicate however, a strong correlation between the effectiveness of the international affiliation agreement and the awarding body; of the eleven Commendations received by private colleges and university colleges which relate explicitly to their academic affiliate, nine (more than 80%) related to affiliations where the affiliate is the awarding body. On the other hand, two thirds of the total Recommendations related to affiliations where academic awards for the programs are made by the local Omani HEI with some kind of ‘attestation’ by the affiliate. In Oman the power to award degrees is granted indirectly through the institutional classification of the HEI (which recognizes colleges, university colleges and universities) although this system itself is not well-developed and does not explicitly address awards. In contrast to mature higher education sectors in some other countries, Oman has no formal process which is specific to granting degree awarding powers to an HEI. There is intention that private colleges and university colleges should not confer their own awards (and it is clear that many would not meet the criteria for degree awarding powers that apply to institutions in the UK, or “self-accrediting” status granted to Australian universities); the MoHE Ministerial Decision 34/2000 states that private colleges and university colleges *shall award the certificates to successful students after they are ratified by the Education Establishment* (i.e. the foreign affiliate). However, as the quality audits reports have revealed, there are a number of private colleges which do, in effect, award their own degrees in that the certificates are issued by the local HEI in Oman and the “attestation” or signing of these by affiliates is not a formal endorsement of academic achievement. Public HEIs and public and private universities are not required to have academic affiliates and, in most cases, they award their own diplomas and degrees⁷. Findings of this review suggest that further consideration of degree awarding powers is required.

⁷ The College of Banking and Financial Studies and the Ministry of Health Institute of Health Sciences offer degrees awarded through UK universities.

Quality Assurance

The OAAA's mandate covers accreditation (for institutions and programs) and quality enhancement. The OAAA intends to use the findings of its quality audits to inform work in these areas with the aim of supporting HEIs in maintaining and building on identified good practices and eliminating aspects of affiliation agreements which are not serving HEIs or their students effectively (shifting the impact profile of foreign affiliations operating in Oman towards the "added value" of the continuum). In terms of helping to ensure the effectiveness of affiliations, there is clear scope for the findings of this study to inform the review of institutional and program accreditation standards that is currently underway in Oman. There is also potential for these findings to inform MoHE institutional and program licensing requirements.

There are also considerations as to whether the formal requirement for an affiliate for some HEIs should be necessary once institutional and program accreditation systems are established. The rationale and effectiveness of this approach to supporting quality needs to be reviewed. At this point in time some affiliations have been helpful but there is a need to increase the effectiveness of these across the board through looking at the features of successful affiliations. It is clear that having it as a requirement is not enough in itself to drive quality.

Quality Enhancement

In terms of quality enhancement there is scope for the Oman Quality Network for Higher Education (a sector driven network) to use the "learning by sharing" approach it has used previously to focus on foreign affiliations and share good practice. Moreover, the authors suggest that an Omani code of practice for affiliations could be developed.

While the responsibility for quality should rest with each HEI, regardless of whether private or public, foreign affiliation partnerships will continue to have an important role to play in supporting the national objectives for HEIs in Oman to meet international standards.

Acronyms

- DGPUC_ Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges (part of the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman)
- HEI_ Higher Education Institution
- MoHE_ Ministry of Higher Education
- OAAA_ Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
- OAC_ Oman Accreditation Council
- QAA_ Quality Assurance Agency, UK

- ROSQA_ Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance
- TNE_ Transnational Education

References

- Al Barwani, T., Ameen, H., & Chapman, D., (2010). Cross-border Collaboration for Quality Assurance in Oman: Contested Terrain. In R. Sakamoto and D. Chapman. (Eds). *Cross-border partnerships in Higher Education: Strategies and Issues*. NY: Routledge Education.
- Al Harthy, M. (2011) *Private Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Rationales, Development and Challenges*. Unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Kassel, Germany.
- Al Lamki, S. (2006) "The Development of Private Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Perception and Analysis" *International Journal of Private Education* (1) 54-77
- Al Shmeli, S. (2011). *Tertiary education in Oman: Catching up rapidly. Tertiary Education in Small States, planning in the context of globalization*, UNESCO.
- Alleyne, V. (2012) 'Cross Border Tertiary Education: Issues and Implications for Barbados' Quality Assurance Framework' Presentation at the *8th Annual CANQATE Conference, 2011 in The Bahamas*
- Ameen, H., Chapman, D., and Al- Barwani, T., (2010). The Tension Between Profit and Quality: Private Higher Education in Oman. In *Higher Education Policy and Global Competition*. Val D. Rust, Laura Portnoind and Sylvia Bagley (Ed.). Palgrave Macmillan, California, USA
- Bashir, S. (2007) "*Trends in International Trade in Higher Education: Implications and Options for Developing Countries*", World Bank, Washington, USA cited in Alleyne, V. (2012) 'Cross Border Tertiary Education: Issues and Implications for Barbados' Quality Assurance Framework' Presentation at the *8th Annual CANQATE Conference, 2011 in The Bahamas*
- Carroll, M., Razvi, S., Goodliffe, T., Al Habsi, F. (2009) 'Progress in Developing a National Quality Management System for Higher Education in Oman', *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 17-27.
- Chapman, D., Al Barwani, T. and Ameen, H. (2009) "Expanding Post Secondary Access in Oman" in Knight, J. (Ed) *Financing Access and Equity in Education*
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (2009) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (3rd Edition), Helsinki
- Goodliffe, T. And Razvi, S. (2008) 'Quality Audits in Oman: potential drivers of change?' Paper presented at the first Oman National Quality Conference *Quality*

Management and Enhancement in Higher Education, Muscat Oman 28-29 October 2008

- Goodliffe, T. and Razvi, S. (2012) ‘Quality Audits in Oman: A Review of the Process and the Findings of the First 25 OAAA Reports’ paper presented at the second *Oman Quality Network Regional Conference* Muscat 20-21 February 2012
- Higher Education Admissions Center (HEAC) (2011) *The Annual Statistical Report of Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman*
- International Education Association of Australia (2008) *Good Practice in Offshore Delivery: a guide for Australian providers*.
Downloaded from: www.ieaa.org.au .
- Knight, J. (2006) “*Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide the Implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for Cross Border Education*” UNESCO/COL, France
- Knight, J. (2010) ‘Higher Education crossing borders: programs and providers on the move’ in D.B. Johnstone, M.B. D’Ambrosio and P.J. Yakoboski (eds) *Higher Education in a Global Society*, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, pp.42-69
- Martin, M. and Stella, A. (2007) ‘Regulating and assuring the quality of cross-border providers of higher education’, Module 5 of *IIEP Distance Education Course on ‘External quality assurance: Options for higher education managers’*; Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO).
- Ministry of National Economy (MoNE) (2010) *Statistical Year Book*, Oman: Ministry of National Economy.
- O’Rourke, S. and Al Bulushi, H. (2010) ‘Managing quality from a distance: a case study of collaboration with Oman and New Zealand’ *Quality in Higher Education* 16:3, pp.197-210
- Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) (2004) *Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance*.
Downloaded from:
http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Oman_ROSQA%20%28all%20part%20one%29.pdf
- Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) (2008) *Quality Audit Manual, Institutional Accreditation: Stage 1*. Oman: Oman Accreditation Council.
Downloaded from: http://www.oaaa.gov.om/QAM_2008_FINAL2.pdf
- Razvi, S. and Carroll, M., (2007) “Towards an effective national quality management system for Oman”, paper presented at the *Biennial Conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education*, Toronto, Canada, 2–5 April.

- Sharieh, A. (2011) 'Case Study: Point View Analysis of Governance and Management in Quality Audit Reports Published by Oman QAAA'. Paper presented at *The International Arab Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, Jordan 10-12 May 2011.
- Stella, A. and Bhushan, S. (Eds) (2011) *Quality Assurance of Transnational Higher Education: the Experiences of Australia and India*, Australian Universities Quality Agency and the National University of Educational Planning and Administration 2011.
- Wilkinson, R. and Al Hajry, A. (2007). The global higher education market: the case of Oman. *Cross-border higher education: regulations, quality assurance, and impact*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO/OECD (2005) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education Provision*
<http://www.oecd.org/education/educationeconomyandsociety/35779480.pdf>