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Increasing National Capability for Quality Higher Education: The case of the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

This paper explores a number of quality enhancement initiatives being implemented in a developing country, the Sultanate of Oman, to increase the national capability for quality higher education. Oman is a young country with a youthful and rapidly growing population. A brief description of the relatively short history of Oman's national systems for secondary and postsecondary education is provided. This highlights the challenges for quality education resulting from a strategy of importing postsecondary education from a variety of countries, and delivering the programs through a largely privatized sector.

The paper then describes the outcomes of an initial needs analysis that led to the development of a National Quality Plan. Some of the strategies in this plan for improving and increasing capability are considered, most particularly the establishment of a practitioner-oriented Oman Quality Network, and the design and implementation of a National Quality Training Program. These two strategies attempt to address common obstacles to capability, namely a paradigm that entrenches compliance and helplessness, and only early awareness of effective quality enhancement and quality assurance principles and methods.

Evaluation results are presented that comment on progress thus far, and suggest critical success factors. These include building legitimacy and trust to overcome barriers to sharing information in a competitive privatized environment. They also include the establishment of peer to peer mechanisms that build confidence and create sustainability over time, as imported or external expertise gives way to local capability and expertise.

Introduction

The authors are currently engaged by the Minister of Higher Education, in the Sultanate of Oman, on 12+ month contracts to assist with the refinement of the current national system of quality assurance for higher education. Carroll is based within the Oman Accreditation Council, a semi-autonomous entity responsible for the national quality assurance system (including, *inter alia*, standards, accreditation and quality audit); Palermo is based within the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges, which licenses provider institutions and programs, and closely supervises the activities of privately owned universities and colleges.[1]

This paper concentrates on one key aspect of their task – raising the sectors' capability through the twin strategies of networking and training. Neither of these strategies has traditionally been regarded as a role for Government in Oman. The lessons learned through this work in progress may have broader application to other developing higher education sectors.

A Brief History of Higher Education in Oman

Oman is a developing country with a population of around 2.5 million (including 666,000 expatriates). It has a youthful population with, as at July 2006, a birthrate of 24.75 per 1000 and growing (although this is offset by a high infant mortality rate of 10.2).[2] Nearly half the population are children or teenagers. Until 1970, the country's economic and social development was stagnant.

The discovery of oil in 1962 meant the advent of economically viable export industry.[3] The first exports took place in 1967. In a very short period of time, Oman's future changed from continuance as a village-based, agricultural and aquacultural country, to potential as a major exporter of a high value commodity. This, in turn, spurred the demand for a more highly educated society. However, international interaction at that time was very low (with the exception of the collaborative oil drilling venture), and intra-national tribal disputes were commonplace.

In 1970 His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said assumed the throne in a coup d'état. Among his many interests were developing greater links with the international community (Oman became a member of the United Nations in 1971)[4] and improving the education of Omani nationals. Prior to 1970 there had been no formal higher education. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the development of government-run colleges, primarily offering vocational (up to certificate level) and technical (up to undergraduate diploma level) programs. These mainly focused on the national priorities of health and teaching. The colleges continue today, and the offerings have expanded to include computer and information technology and business courses, as well as a small number of other subjects.

A major development occurred in 1986 with the inauguration of Sultan Qaboos University[5] (SQU), a comprehensive university located just outside the capitol region of Muscat. Today, SQU is the major higher education institution in Oman with over 10,000 students and seven Colleges (Agriculture, Arts, Commerce and Economics, Education, Engineering, Medicine, Science). It offers programs up to masters level, and is looking to offer doctoral programs in the near future. Nonetheless, SQU on its own could not accommodate the growing demand for higher education places.

In the mid 1990s, a major strategic shift was implemented. Mindful that it did not have the capacity or capability to develop and deliver sufficient higher education opportunities to meet the needs of a youthful and growing population, Oman started importing higher education in earnest. The principal delivery mechanism was to establish privately owned local colleges and universities, offering imported diploma and degree programs from credible higher education providers in such countries as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.

One of the consequences is that Oman imported not only a diverse range of educational opportunities, but also a diverse range of quality assurance systems, including wide variances in standards, data, approval mechanisms, transnational quality assurance mechanisms and transparency. This has made any national strategising extremely difficult.

Oman is now entering into a new phase: the establishment of a comprehensive system of quality assurance and quality enhancement. This is an attempt, through improved quality management, to consolidate significant gains in sectoral growth. Oman's higher education sector now has 22 private providers of higher education programs (including three private universities); over two dozen public colleges (of various forms) and the public SQU. In Omani parlance they are all described as higher education (the authors recognise that this does not stand up to most international definitions).

National Needs Analysis

In the first half of 2006, Carroll was asked to review the Omani system of higher education[6] and recommend improvements. The method for this review included, amongst other things, semi-structured visits to a majority of the private higher education providers and some of the public providers (the emphasis was placed on private providers because that is where most variance in the sector is to be found), with a view to assessing compliance with the then system; capability and capacity to engage with a more advanced

quality assurance system; and general concerns and suggestions. These visits were then compared with interviews with government officials and staff, and an analysis of available documentation.

The sector was quick to acknowledge that 'quality' was a new concept, but one which was keenly sought. It became apparent that, with some exceptions, there was: little systematic planning and aligned resource management within higher education providers; a dearth of internal and external review activities; little evaluative activity such as student evaluations of teaching; almost no performance monitoring; and few incentives to pursue quality improvement initiatives.

A number of senior management in the provider institutions were interested in simply receiving clear instructions about what they were supposed to do. As they expressed, the sector was (and is) struggling to prioritise quality management activities whilst at the same time endeavouring to attract (or develop) well qualified and experienced staff to a young sector in a developing country. It was (and is) also addressing students who, upon entry, lack the learning skills necessary to help ensure their success at higher studies (the vast majority of students are required to undertake a general foundation year, for which there is no quality assurance system).[7] This is not surprising. The vast majority of higher education students are first generation higher education students in their families. The secondary schooling sector is having to raise its standards in recognition that it is no longer only preparing students for the workforce, but also for further studies.

Issues pertaining to the strategic direction of the sector also arose during the consultations. It became apparent that the privatisation of a developing country's education system generates significant challenges. In a country where profit can readily be made through the oil, gas and related industries, the motivation to invest in higher education typically comes with the expectation of high returns in the short term. This is not always compatible with the need to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff; invest in learning resources; and maintain academic standards (especially regarding student pass rates).

Another consequence of a largely privatized sector is that provider institutions have little collaborative interaction. Competition is fierce, particularly for qualified and experienced staff. Early feedback about proposed collaborative initiatives, such as benchmarking clubs or a quality network, was that they would not be successful because the national culture did not favour such cooperation.

Also, Oman is a monarchist nation steeped in respect for the absolute authority of persons in senior social and political positions. Insistence on adherence to regulatory systems can conflict with this social order, especially when the private higher education institutions are owned by such senior people. In addition to the obvious tensions this can create at a national system level, within institutions this social order has the effect of inhibiting free and frank discussions about improvement opportunities.

The major finding from the consultative process was that the introduction of any new system will have challenges that are not merely procedural, but also profoundly cultural.

The New National System

The new system being proposed for Oman is set out in a draft *National Quality Plan* which, at the time of this paper being written, had just been approved for consultation with the sector.[8] It is too complex to describe in detail here, containing seventy substantial objectives grouped into fourteen goals. However, the key elements include development of internationally benchmarked standards for institutional and program approvals, and a consolidated set of licensing and accreditation processes (including an alternative route of 'program recognition' for those programs already accredited in overseas jurisdictions and subject to appropriate transnational quality assurance processes).[9] Within a matter of years, it is expected that all higher education providers must be duly licensed (aka provisionally accredited) by the Ministry of Higher Education and subsequently accredited as competent providers by the Oman Accreditation Council. Similarly, all higher education programs must be licensed (aka provisionally accredited) by the MoHE prior to first intake, and subsequently accredited by the OAC.

Advice from the sector, and direct observation, indicates that most (perhaps all) providers will require assistance prior to applying for institutional accreditation. Therefore, a system of formative evaluations, in the form of external quality audits, will be introduced prior to the summative assessment approach of institutional accreditation.

It is not expected that the proposed system will be a permanent solution for Oman (what system is?). Feedback from some visiting academics suggested that in some countries with more developed higher education, the notion of having external program accreditation, compared with having self-accrediting universities, would be considered a retrograde step. However, in the context of its brief history and the consequential wide range of educational offerings, the establishment and application of national standards (and, most importantly, development of a shared *understanding* of standards) is an appropriate strategy for Oman at this time.

As has been stated already, the introduction of such a system requires attention to processes and culture. With this in mind, the draft *National Quality Plan* has been based on a number of guiding principles, which serve as a checklist for whether each objective and its supporting strategies are appropriate for Oman. One of these guiding principles is Sustainable Omanisation. It states: “implementation of the quality management system must, in time, be sustainable within Oman and manageable independently from other countries. This will require Omani ownership of the system, and building the capacity and capability of the people in terms of quality awareness, standards, processes and skills.”

This guiding principle, in particular, underpins the two strategies which form the primary topics of this paper: establishment of an Oman Quality Network and a National Quality Training Program. Each of these is discussed in the following sections.

The Oman Quality Network

One specific objective in the draft *National Quality Plan* is “to establish an Oman Quality Network to facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas and effective practices.”

The MoHE notes in its *Strategic Plan for Education* that “the level of cooperation [between private HEPs] is very limited”.^{[10][10]} This has been reinforced during the aforementioned visits by OAC staff to HEPs.

The Strategic Plan 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. This strategy has been used to tremendous and sustainable effect, albeit in a slightly different form, in New Zealand (through annual Quality Enhancement Meetings) and Australia (through the annual Australian Universities Quality Forum and annual Auditor Meetings of the Australian Universities Quality Agency – given that the auditors are primarily senior representatives from the sector).

Possible roles for a quality network include (and are not limited to) the following:

- a. To share good practices, strategies, research and development in relation to the enhancement of quality in higher education.
- b. To provide feedback to the Ministry of Higher Education and other agencies, as appropriate, on proposed standards, policies and processes.
- c. To raise the capability and professional skills of the sector in quality enhancement and quality assurance.
- d. To conduct regular meetings for the purposes of discussing priority topics (refer to sample list attached).
- e. To identify and prioritise professional development training needs for the sector.

- f. To commission the development of training modules in quality enhancement.
- g. To conduct an annual Oman Quality Network Conference or Forum.
- h. To establish and participate regularly in online communications / discussions on issues of quality enhancement and assurance.
- i. To establish working parties on various priority topics as the need arises.
- j. To establish a database of network member details and expertise for the purposes of sharing capability across the sector.
- k. To encourage members to document their good practice, and experiences about successes, failures and lessons learned through systemic inquiry and reflection.
- l. To conduct or commission research into quality enhancement and improvement on priority topics.
- m. To publish a regular newsletter with contributions from the whole higher education sector.
- n. To review its performance against its objectives on at least an annual basis.

Questions about who should be members, how money would be collected and managed, who would authorize such a group, and what official status it would have were constant throughout the process. The initiative clashed at every step with the entrenched paradigm of requiring formal approvals at very senior levels for every type of activity. For example, problems with membership occurred because the authors invited institutions to nominate members (according to responsibility for quality issues within their HEP and the ability to influence and communicate change) and 'elect' an Executive Committee, whereas previously MoHE officials were accustomed to appointing people according to seniority and tribal affiliation. An issue arose when it was decided, in the interest of expediency, that all communication should be via email whereas MoHE and sector staff were accustomed to communicating via officially sanctioned letters and memos. Some resistance also arose from HEP members who were unaccustomed to sharing information in what is usually a fiercely competitive environment, given the scale of private higher education in Oman. Initially, there was skepticism from some members about the MoHE's role in the network and whether it would indeed provide a forum for sharing openly without fear of adverse consequences. These problems provided the project team (comprising the authors and a number of Omani staff from the OAC and MoHE) the opportunity to reinforce principles that had been untried in practice. These principles included the following:

- a. The Oman Quality Network is a network of the whole higher education sector, including private and public institutions. It is not an instrument of the government nor a mechanism for conducting campaigns outside of the quality agenda by the HEPs.
- b. The Oman Quality Network is a network of equal peers. All leadership roles in the network will be shared.
- c. The Oman Quality Network will share, in good faith, information about successes, failures and lessons learned in quality assurance.
- d. Nothing shared in the Oman Quality Network will be used in a manner detrimental to any Oman Quality Network member. All materials shared will be referenced to their source in the expected manner.
- e. Although HEPs may compete on a number of levels, the Oman Quality Network recognizes that we can achieve things together that we could not achieve individually.

- f. The Oman Quality Network will periodically review its activities and progress in relation to raising the capacity of the sector in quality enhancement and quality assurance.

The Oman Quality Network was officially launched in September 2006 with Her Excellency, Dr Rawya Al Busaidiya, Minister of Higher Education as Patron. This occurred after many months of negotiating for a non-hierarchical and informal network via a hierarchical bureaucracy that is used to dealing with official business through formal channels. The engagement of a Minister as Patron proved to be invaluable in eliminating some aspects of resistance, and the delivery by the Minister of an address espousing the benefits of an informal network eliminated yet others.

At the time of writing, the Oman Quality Network has 'elected' an Executive Committee and lists nearly 90 members nominated from all HEPs in the Sultanate of Oman, including SQU. The network's charter is in a final draft with only the matter of membership fees still outstanding. The financial operations of the Oman Quality Network have proven to be difficult due to its informal status, however the Director General of Finance within the Ministry of Higher Education persuaded a manager of a leading Omani bank to open an account in the name of the Oman Quality Network whilst the Executive pursues formal registration as a non-profit organisation (this may take some time). The Oman Quality Network has a draft budget which includes the delivery of the Training Program (mentioned in the next session) in 2007 including the ability to invite three international experts to prepare and provide modules. A meeting set to occur in late 2007 will formulate the program of topics for the Training Program in 2007, and will also discuss the possibility of conducting a national forum on quality higher education, including calls for papers and participation from scholars, practitioners, policy and decision makers from outside of the membership of the Oman Quality Network. Progress to date bodes well for the sustainability of the Oman Quality Network and the Training Program in 2007 at the very least.

The National Quality Training Program

In designing an improved national quality management system it became apparent that a corresponding commitment was required to raising the capability of that sector. Whereas a more mature sector may have greater capacity to cope with changes in the regulatory environment, a young sector with limited experience requires assistance. The draft *National Quality Plan* includes the following objective: "to provide generic training to the sector on standards, accreditation processes and quality assurance". Notwithstanding that the overall Plan has not yet been finalised and approved, this objective had been approved for immediate action. The primary strategy for implementing the objective was to establish a National Quality Training Program to help raise the capability of both the providers and the governmental policy makers and regulators.

The program is being developed in two phases. The first phase is designed and delivered primarily by consultants (the authors) with a view to (a) raising awareness of quality management practices in general, and (b) helping prepare the sector for the country's new quality management system in particular. This phase includes 22 modules, to be delivered in less than nine months (this timetable is faster than desirable, but is driven by the terms of the consultants' contracts). Some specific topics are focused on introducing or strengthening basic quality assurance skills and tools, such as: 03 KPI; 04 Statistics in Reporting; 05 Good Documentation; and 08 Process Mapping. Others are focused more on shifting the culture, such as: 02 Conceptual Framework for Standards; 10 Consulting Stakeholders; 18 Managing Human Resources; and 20 Good Governance. Some fit evenly between the two, such as: 09 Benchmarking; 12 Risk Management; 13 Getting the Most from Student Evaluations; and 14 Maximising Learning Outcomes. Yet others concentrate directly on preparing the sector for new aspects of the national quality management system, such as: 06 Preparing a Self Study Portfolio; 15 Quality Audit; and 21& 22 Institutional and Program Accreditation respectively.

In the second phase, control of the program will be passed from the government to the Oman Quality Network. It is anticipated that, in addition to some contracted international experts (a common term in Omani parlance), staff from Omani providers and government will design and provide the training. The scope of the modules will be broadened to encompass an unlimited range of good practices in higher education and higher education quality assurance. In this way, local ideas and good practices can be

celebrated and Oman can take ownership of this system as per the guiding principle of Sustainable Omanisation.

There are numerous challenges to providing a National Quality Training Program. Logistically, it is difficult to design and deliver over twenty modules to over fifty HEPs. While the majority of providers are based in the capital region of Muscat, some are up to 900 km away in the southern city of Salalah, with yet more at various places in between. One of the primary strategies for overcoming this is to use a 'train the trainer' approach. All the training materials are provided on the website, so that attendees may use them to provide repeat workshops within their own workplaces. Also, the most fundamental training module (on ADRI a method of quality assurance analysis) was provided to over twenty higher education providers, with an emphasis on those outside of Muscat, *in situ* at their campuses.

There are also cultural challenges. As with any change process, there was some resistance to new ideas. For example, Deans challenged the need for a new approach to Strategic Planning when they found (unbudgeted) priority lists sufficient; some staff questioned the need for process mapping when they had managed thus far without it. Such challenges are to be expected. To accept the training as valid requires acceptance of the potential to improve the current situation. This, in turn, requires acceptance that the current situation is less than optimal. The current strategising and quality management development is perhaps the first serious attempt at critiquing the Omani higher education system, and so generated some predictable and manageable resistance.

Two other challenges were far more significant from a cultural perspective. One was a sense of learned helplessness arising from cultural factors. Staff expressed disappointment that they would not be empowered to utilize the skills they were learning, such as policy development, because of entrenched power structures. The other significant challenge – tantamount to a paradigm shift – was the need to introduce a new pedagogy that put student acquisition of problem solving skills, a commitment to lifelong learning and a sense of critical enquiry centre stage. This was very difficult for a country where the adult generation, including many of the current academic staff, were educated using a pedagogy focused primarily on memorization, regurgitation, and an unquestioning acceptance of interpretations given by teachers.

Care was taken to ensure that the design of Training Modules would maximize their positive impact. There had been some previous attempts at providing training on a national scale to the sector. However, these tended to be singular workshops focused on a *description* of the (then) national system rather than the development of skills by the sector. For the new program, it was decided that each module should comprise a number of elements. First is a seminar based on clearly defined learning objectives, a balance of theory and practical skills, and using engaging presentation aids. PowerPoint was chosen because of its versatility (notwithstanding criticisms from Tufte)[11] and ease of posting to, and downloading from, the Internet.

Second, interactive workshops for each module are provided to the sector. In order to reach the whole sector, and bearing in mind the logistical limits to capacity, attendance preference is given to members of the Oman Quality Network. Each workshop comprises the one hour seminar, followed by a short refreshment break, then a one hour workshop in which attendees break into groups of five to eight people to undertake groupwork oriented around the learning objectives of the module. At the end of the groupwork there is usually a plenary feedback and discussion session.

Handouts are prepared for the workshops. Each handout includes the seminar slides, modified as necessary for printing (necessary because many of the slides use complex animations) in black and white, and a list of additional references and learning resources to enable further exploration of the topic by participants.

The module slides are amended in light of the workshops. In particular, the group work activities may lead to a refinement of case studies and model answers. Sometimes, workshop reports are prepared that document the outcome of group work activities, especially when those activities relate to the production of resources that may have ongoing utility (such as draft standards or good practices)

The slides, handouts and reports are then posted for free access on a public website.[12] In order to ensure that the momentum generated through the workshop is not lost, a discussion board will be attached to each module to enable ongoing discourse. At the time of writing this paper the discussion boards had not gone live and it is unknown whether they will prove to be effective elements of the program.

In order to determine whether the National Quality Training Program is meeting the needs of the sector as perceived by the sector, all modules are evaluated at the end of each workshop using a participant evaluation survey. The survey comprises quantitative and qualitative questions. The results for seven workshops (on seven different topics – some workshops have been run more than once, but those results have not yet been processed) have now been processed and informative results are starting to emerge.

Ten quantitative items are positive-oriented and use a 1-5 Likert-type agree/disagree response scale. The first nine cover such issues as: “the content was intellectually stimulating”; “resources provided are useful and relevant”; and “the group activities aid learning”. For example, one item, “I would recommend this workshop to others”, has a mean response of 4.39 (± 0.74) where 5 is the optimum result. The lowest response is to the item: “The workshop met my expectations”, with a mean response of 4.04 (± 0.95). The tenth is a summary question: “overall, this workshop was excellent”. This item has a mean response of 4.26 (± 0.7).

The eleventh question asks the respondents to rate their awareness of the topic prior to the workshop and after the workshop. It uses a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = no understanding and 5 = high level of understanding. The possible differences between pre and post ratings therefore range from -4 to +4. After seven workshops the mean response is +1.10 (± 0.7). This is one indication (albeit inconclusive) that the training program is adding value to the sector.

The four qualitative questions are: (a) what were the most positive aspects of this module? (b) what aspects need improving? (c) how will you apply this in your workplace? and (d) any other comments? The responses to these questions have been mostly generic positive comments. However, some interesting themes have emerged, such as appreciation of the networking opportunities generated by the National Quality Training Program and appreciation of the introduction of new concepts to Oman in such a forthright manner.

Overwhelmingly, workshop participants found the group activities and feedback sessions to be the most beneficial part of the training module delivery. They enjoy hearing about others’ experiences and also receiving feedback on group outcomes. The following comments in particular summarise this point and others in relation to positive aspects of the training:

“...it helped to learn from each others experiences, either receiving positive or negative feedback.”

“Working in groups and understanding the different level of knowledge on various topics, and the misunderstandings.”

Some participants, and the authors, were aware that the group activities were improving with time as the Training Program proceeded:

“Seeing [the] same faces deepens contact and this widens sharing experiences.”

“Increasingly good group activities as participants get to know each other.”

Interestingly, some participants also noted that the group activities modeled in the Training Program were beneficial and could be applied within their own workplaces:

“Working as a group makes us share ideas and learn more. Group work is very beneficial and can be applied in our current work.”

Other positive aspects included the use of examples and scenarios during the lecture and group activities to effectively make links between theory and practice. Participants indicated that they valued the new concepts presented and tools provided during the training (including the hand-out with additional references):

"[Provided] stimulation of thinking."

"It gave me a tool to improve."

Participants appreciated the 'simple' delivery of complex concepts, however sometimes variations in audience background and English proficiency proved challenging:

"I am really happy with this workshop, found it informative. The QA system is new to Oman. So such a workshop was very good [for] disseminating information and raising awareness about QA."

"Clear explanation, globally relevant, crisp, focused."

"The presenter tried to make it as easy as possible. Still would have been easier if it was more gradual for the average listener."

Most of the comments received in relation to opportunities for improving the Training Program modules were related to logistical issues. This often related to time management: going over time, not enough time, too many workshops in a month, not enough workshops in a month etc. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that the more time needed to be allocated for group discussions and activities, including more 'real' case studies or scenarios:

"More time for group work – more time to discuss feedback from groups so we can correct mistakes".

Interestingly, comments from the sector during the visits early in the year are not being echoed in the survey feedback, even though the people are mostly the same. One optimistic interpretation may be that the desired shift in thinking away from a compliance mentality towards a proactive quality consciousness is starting to take effect.

Applicability of module content to the workplace was confirmed by most participants at each Training Workshop. They indicated how they would apply concepts learnt in practice within their own institutions. Many also indicated that the training raised awareness about what they didn't know, and therefore indicated the need to learn more from other sources. This was a particularly encouraging finding, given the need to cultivate a more evidenced based decision making culture in the higher education sector:

"I will do a literature search first to understand it more and then apply it."

"This workshop has made me realize that I first need to learn more before going further."

"Get started in a more formal way [and] seek assistance from [the] host university."

Many participants suggested that the workshops provided them with a 'place to start' and indicated that the Training would impact positively on the development of new processes within their institutions:

"[We are a] new college [so we can] set in place ADRI from the start."

"This workshop helped me think about a strategic plan for my unit and then try to implement it and self review it."

The focus of the Training Program as a train-the-trainer resource was understood by some participants who indicated that they would share this information with others back at their institution or workplace:

"[I will] start training other staff who have not attended the workshop."

"I have the handout plus the [web] site. The first thing I will recommend the topic to my manager and conduct a presentation to all involved employees so lots of changes and sharing knowledge will be there".

In all, the feedback to date is certainly strong enough to support the continuation of the National Quality Training Program. Whether or not it is having a consequential impact on actual practice remains to be seen, and is the topic of the next section.

Evaluation Study

As well as evaluating each module, the authors felt that it was critical to examine the impact of initiatives longitudinally. The need for an evaluation study was premised in the preliminary project proposals for the National Quality Training Program. Therefore a coordinated evaluation approach was earmarked from the beginning and assumed to be an integral part of design elements associated with the training program and Oman Quality Network.

The study aims to determine shifts in the sector's state of higher education quality capability pre and post the first year of the National Quality Training Program and the establishment of the Oman Quality Network. An evaluation of these initiatives will inform decisions about the sustainability of these programs over time.

The study design involves two stages. The first involves conducting brief interviews with members of the Quality Network (50 members by the end of 2006) to ascertain initial perceptions about the current level of capability within the sector. These interviews are being conducted over the phone or face to face and comply with an interview schedule utilising standardized open ended questions. Stage 2 involves follow up interviews with the same participants and will occur six to twelve months from the initial interview date to ascertain perceptions in the level of change in capability.

An Omani project team was assembled involving junior to middle level MoHE and OAC staff with Palermo as team leader. The establishment of such a project is, in itself, an opportunity to raise the capability of MoHE and OAC staff in evaluation and evidenced-based decision making. This team participated in an Interview Skills Workshop conducted by Palermo in order to introduce interviewing concepts, raise capability and confidence and establish rapport amongst the team. The Workshop aimed to:

- Raise awareness of different types of interviews and their applications.
- Increase competency in active listening and note taking skills.
- Increase understanding of elements of devising questions.
- Increase confidence in conducting a structured interview.

At the time of writing a pool of 50 members, randomly selected from the Oman Quality Network representatives, have been invited to participate in the study. The first interviews have been conducted.

The follow up interviews will occur after Palermo has left Oman. Whilst she intends to support the team from a distance, the successful completion of the study will be the responsibility of the Omani team. This will no doubt be a litmus test of the sustainability of the project, and whether the Omani team has gained the necessary competencies during Stage 1 to complete the study.

Conclusion

Oman is at an exciting time in its development, where it refocuses from a strategy almost entirely based on growth to one that seeks to balance growth with quality. However, the introduction of a new national regulatory system to a developing country is doomed to failure unless it is accompanied by a corresponding commitment to raising the capability of that sector. Oman's proposed new system requires more than mere compliance with governmental directives. It also requires a reconceptualisation of the way in which higher

education can operate effectively within Omani society and the international higher education community. It follows that the capability-raising must focus on upskilling and networking rather than simply awareness raising.

The evaluative results gathered this far and mentioned in this paper are already suggesting a number of key critical success factors for raising capability that may be generalisable to other developing countries:

Empower people through active connections. Senior staff and quality managers from HEPs across Oman meet as a group via a networking mechanism (the Oman Quality Network). Connections are reinforced in practice during group activities in the delivery of the National Quality Training Program. In future, it is intended that this be capitalised upon through the establishment of benchmarking clubs.

Parity of esteem. The Oman Quality Network involves both HEP and government representatives in a forum of equals. The modus operandi of the Oman Quality Network, as described in its guidelines, ensures that communication and decision making flows equally between peers during meetings.

Provision of peer-based leadership. The Oman Quality Network provides, for the first time in Oman, a mechanism by which the HEP and Government can share leadership responsibilities for issues related to quality higher education. While there is still a legitimate and essential leadership role for the Minister, there is also scope for the sector itself to take greater ownership of the quality agenda, and thereby develop as, in part, a self-regulating sector.

Adopt a systems approach. The Training Program provides an integrated and systematic approach to skills development, starting from an overall tool for review and audit (in the ADRI workshop) to more and more complex areas related to quality higher education, such as good teaching and curriculum development. Modules are linked and reinforce earlier competencies in later modules. Module resources are standardized to allow familiarity with the material and ease of access from the website. The Training Program provides an overall road map, and then concepts and tools for achieving improvement, one step at a time.

Plan for sustainability. Succession planning for project management of the initiatives (the National Quality Training Program and the Oman Quality Network) and their ongoing review were planned from the beginning and embedded (and budgeted) into the design of the projects. For example, agreement on the role of the Oman Quality Network as taking over responsibility for the Training Program was a critical milestone in the development of that program.

It is too soon to definitively determine the effectiveness of the two strategies outlined in this paper. Early indications (acceptance by Government of the *National Quality Plan* as a draft; attendances at Oman Quality Network meetings and National Quality Training Program workshops; evaluations of workshops; and informal feedback) suggest that there is a legitimate and welcome role for the Government in stepping beyond its regulatory role to also take on a quality enhancement role. Early predictions that collaborative initiatives would fail are not being fulfilled.

[1] While there is no specific definition of the term ‘supervision’ within the Oman higher education system, in practice it pertains to monitoring and, at times, directing the operational activities of private universities and colleges. This role of Government is, in itself, the topic of considerable attention by the authors but will not be discussed in this paper other than here as contextual information.

[2] [Http://www.moneoman.gov.om/monthly_bulletin/july2006/T1.htm](http://www.moneoman.gov.om/monthly_bulletin/july2006/T1.htm), last accessed 22 October 2006.

[3] [Http://www.pdo.co.om/PDO/AboutPdo/History/](http://www.pdo.co.om/PDO/AboutPdo/History/), last accessed 22 October 2006.

[4] [Http://www.un.org/Overview/unmember.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/unmember.html).

[5] [Http://www.squ.edu.om](http://www.squ.edu.om), last accessed 22 October 2006.

[6] The system which is being replaced will remain available on the Oman Ministry of Higher Education Website until it has been fully replaced. This is anticipated as occurring within one year of the date of this paper. See <http://www.mohe.gov.om/B%20PART%20ONE%20APPROVED.pdf>, last accessed 22 October 2006.

[7] In recognition of the importance of foundation programs and the need for them to be successful, a Foundation Programs Symposium will be held in January 2006. This symposium will debate draft standards, which can be used for curriculum development and external program audit.

[8] It is anticipated that the draft *National Quality Plan* will be posted on the Oman Accreditation Council’s website before the end of November 2006. See <http://www.oac.gov.om>.

[9] Details of the new system were presented in three posters to the Australian Quality Forum, and will soon be available at the AUQF website: <http://www.auqa.edu.au/auqf/2006/awards/index.htm> and the Oman Accreditation Council website <http://www.oac.gov.om>.

[10] Directorate-General for Private Universities & Colleges, (April 2004), *Private Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman*, (p11).

[11] Tufte, Edward, (1997) *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, and Tufte, Edward (1997) *Visual explanations: images and quantities, evidence and narrative*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.

The Association of Institutional Research, mindful of criticisms such as from Tufte, established a Best Visual Presentation Committee which produced a monograph on producing good practice presentations, particularly using PowerPoint. See Bers, T et al, (April 6, 2005). *Best Visual Presentation – Observations from the Award Committee*, IT Applications, Vol. 4. This is available to AIR members only at <http://www.airweb.org/>.

[12] [Http://www.oac.gov.om/enhancement/training](http://www.oac.gov.om/enhancement/training), last accessed 22 October 2006.