

Reflection on Developing A'Sharqiyah University's Institutional Accreditation Application

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Abstract

This paper intends to reflect on the accreditation task that took place this academic year. This reflection covers the Application itself; from various draft iterations to the ingathering of Supporting Materials, and a mock accreditation event. It also covers the planning visit of OAAAQA and after, matters for clarification and additional Supporting Materials. In addition, the paper covers the visit itself including interviews. The paper ends by presenting key conclusions and recommendations based on this journey from two members of the University's Writing Team.

Keywords: A'Sharqiyah University, ISA application, writing team, Oman, OAAAQA, reflection

1. Introduction

The Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance (OAAAQA), as per its Institutional Standards Assessment Manual, sees institutional accreditation as an initial two stage process. Stage 1 involves a Quality Audit "aimed at helping HEIs build and improve their internal quality assurance systems" (Oman Accreditation Council (2008)- OAAAQA website). The Quality Audit (which happens only once) is followed by Stage 2: Standards Assessment. The OAAAQA states that this normally takes place four years after an HEI in Oman has undergone the Quality Audit. This then triggers a five-year institutional accreditation cycle. This Standards Assessment will entail ASU being assessed as to whether it has met or not met the standards set by the OAAAQA. All applicable standards must be met to achieve institutional accreditation. As noted, this cycle continues with a Standards Assessment taking place every five years thereafter.

"Different institutions are now at different stages of these tasks, some are in the process of the General Foundation Programs audit, the institutional Standards Accreditation, and some have already been accredited. On the other hand, both the Oman Qualifications Framework and the Program Accreditation have been launched recently" (Al Jardani, 2023 p. 15). A'Sharqiyah University is still currently undergoing the Institutional Accreditation stage and once completed will move to Program Accreditation.

2. A'Sharqiyah University's Status

The University completed stage one of the OAAAQA Institutional Accreditation process in 2017 and received the OAAAQA Audit Report in May 2018. The University prepared for Stage 1 by appointing a project steering committee, the Quality Audit Steering Committee, that consisted of the chairs of various Standard Sub-Committees. It was the role of these same sub-committees, made up of a Chair and various members of staff, to draught each of the Standards using the ADRI format which would then later be collected into one document, thus forming the University's Quality Audit Report. The rationale for the Stage 1: Quality Audit was to determine 'the HEI's capacity and capability to achieve its aspirations and to continually improve' (Oman Accreditation Council (2008)-OAAAQA website).

The University has recently gone through Stage Two of the accreditation process – the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA). Therefore, this paper reflects on this process and provides insight on matters for improvement and recommendations for the future.

3. The Application

At the heart of the Stage 2 Standards Assessment is the ISA Application written by the HEI as a means of showcasing how it meets international standards as required by the OAAAQA. Through the application and subsequent Panel Visit, the OAAAQA is interested in the HEI demonstrating how it meets each Standard at an organisational level and across all of its operations in a systematic way. In this, OAAAQA advises HEIs to use the ADRI cycle as a means of reviewing all relevant processes and evaluating their effectiveness. The Panel tasked with reviewing the Application and who conduct the subsequent visit are interested in the HEI showcasing results that have been achieved through the combined implementation of defined systems, processes and practices (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016). Benchmarking with both national and international HEIs is also encouraged, the results of which are to be included in the Application, as a means of demonstrating how the HEI performs in each Standard and criteria compared to the performance of others.

3.1 Writing the Application

The initial process for writing the Application began in 2018-19 and followed similar lines to that employed by the University at Stage 1, namely: the formation of committees for each Standard with a Chair and individual members who would do the majority of the investigation, research and writing before their written findings would be brought together as one coherent document. These Committees were to meet six times per year as per their Terms of Reference (ToRs) (A'Sharqiyah University (2018- 2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022). Yet, it was assumed that meetings would take place more frequently, usually monthly or fortnightly at the least, with each member being assigned one or two (depending on the size of the Standard) criteria that they were responsible for and were to report on each week. The ToRs of each committee matched the introduction of each Standard and incorporated each criterion. Committees were tasked with identifying and reporting risks, providing progress reports to the Accreditation and Standards Committee (ASC), making recommendations for the alignment of policies with OAAAQA Standards, ensuring that ADRI was implemented whenever needed, and ensuring the availability of robust evidence for each indicator for each criterion for at least five years counting backwards from the date of the accreditation visit itself.

In 2019, the decision was taken to form a Writing Team that would take over the duties previously held by the Standard sub-committees. The formation of such a Team was approved in March of that year by the ASC. The Team, originally to be five in number, was later to be expanded to 8, but noting a lack of progress was again reduced to three persons. However, this time an emphasis would be placed on preparing and submitting the ISA Application and all relevant supporting materials. The Writing Team was tasked with drafting the Application standard by standard, identifying raw materials and evidence as well as focal points within the University to assist in this work, identifying data that needed to be analysed, and agreeing any deadlines for submission with focal points/ concerned Units. The Writing Team would seek to draft and redraft one Standard per month and submit them for review with the various Unit Heads/ Focal Points, and implement any revisions required within 48 hours before forwarding them to the ASC for further review. This cycle would be repeated until the Application and various iterations had been completed and all were of the belief that the Application was the best it could be. However, from the outset it was felt that such a schedule was overly ambitious and this would be proven correct as time progressed with some Standards taking more than the envisioned month to complete, especially as the Writing Team for the majority of the Application's writing met outwith working hours. Delays in responses to information or requests for data from the various Units also did not help the situation.

In the initial stages, Units were identified with a particular Standard and asked to write a submission for the Standard based on the ADRI system for use by the Writing Team. These submissions were to be placed in a specially designated folder on their own internal system that the Writing Team had access to. In time, it became clear that many of the submissions were not an accurate reflection of the work inside the University nor of a standard that assisted the Writing Team to any great degree. The Writing Team then began to develop the drafts for each Standard based on email correspondence and one-to-one meetings with the various Units. This proved far more effective and enabled the Writing Team to accurately reflect the workings of the University and dampen much of the noise of the original Unit submissions.

3.2 Supporting Materials

In writing the Application, any and all claims should be supported by evidence, which can be either quantitative or qualitative, and said claims should be factually accurate and defensible. The OAAAQA places a particular emphasis on Supporting Materials as these enable the Panel ‘to verify claims made in the Application and to facilitate its understanding of the HEI’ (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016)). All Supporting Materials should be referenced and follow a clear indexing system that is understandable to both those inside the HEI and the Panel.

Originally, the University asked all Units to create a folder wherein they would place any Supporting Materials they felt would be of use to the Application. These were divided by Standard and Criteria. Later, a system was developed where all should carry an alphanumeric code for identification purposes. Later still, it was decided that each Unit should identify Supporting Materials that answered each of the indicators for criteria related to their Units, or for which their Units had an interest. Although good in principle this latter idea came too late to have any real bearing on the Application or the Supporting Materials to be used, as many of the subsequent Supporting Materials uploaded did not have a bearing on what was written in the Application nor to the actual workings of the University. In the end the choice of Supporting Materials selected was really the decision of the Writing Team in so far as they supported and defended the claims they had written. In hindsight, it would have been preferable if Executive Management had played a larger role in Supporting Material selection and review, however due to time constraints and work commitment this was not feasible.

Following selection of the relevant Supporting Materials each then had to be indexed in an easily understandable format. Whilst the OAAAQA recommends a consecutive numbering sequence to be used beginning with the Required Supporting Materials to the end of the Supporting Materials themselves, the University felt that this would cause too many issues should changes be required at a later date. As such, the Required Supporting Materials were numbered following the OAAAQA system:

SM001 Institutional establishment and licensing information

SM002 Official licences for all programmes offered

SM003 Current Catalogue

The remaining Supporting Materials being numbered consecutively per Standard following a slightly modified system, namely:

1.1.1 University Innovation Strategy

1.1.2 BoT Approval of the Strategic Plan

...

2.3.1 APTIS Results

2.3.2 Undergraduate Academic Regulations

...etc

This system reflected the Standard, Criterion and order that the Supporting Material comes in in relation to both. This form of indexing allowed for changes with minimal disruption to the Application text or the Supporting Materials themselves.

3.3 Mock Accreditation

The University felt it expedient to hold a Mock Accreditation event. This took place in separate two phases. Firstly, Critical Friends were invited to review Draft 2 of Standards 1 and 2 as well as conduct interviews with selected staff and provide feedback on same. Although a good exercise, it was agreed that Standards could not be reviewed in isolation and that a full Mock Accreditation event should take place that reviewed both the full draft Application, Supporting Materials and included interviews with staff akin to the actual OAAAQA Panel visit. This was to take place six months prior to the Application submission deadline to allow for any revisions arising from the subsequent Mock Accreditation Report to be incorporated into the draft.

Three Critical Friends were selected, each knowledgeable about and practically familiar with the accreditation process in Oman, and were given one month to review the draft Application (Draft 2) and Supporting Materials before conducting a two-day Mock Accreditation event at the University campus. The Report received following the event was invaluable in helping the University not only see where there were gaps in its Application, but also in the quality and appropriateness of its Supporting Materials and directly informed many of the revisions and additions

that went into Draft 3 of the Application moving forward. It also gave the University an insight as to how a Panel may perceive its Application and Supporting Materials and look upon the University during their visit. The Mock Accreditation event itself also aided in preparing staff, many of whom were experiencing Institutional Accreditation for the first time, for what to expect during the actual Panel Visit.

3.4 Planning Visit, Matters for Clarification and Additional Supporting Materials

As per the OAAAQA's Institutional Standards Assessment Manual, the Review Director 'will visit the HEI to discuss the forthcoming Standards Assessment Visit and other matters pertaining to Standards Assessment' (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016)). The main purpose of these visits is to discuss any operational matters necessary for a successful Standards Assessment with a focus on facilitating and preparing for the said visit (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016)), what it is not is an opportunity for the Panel to conduct interviews akin to the Standards Assessment itself or other related activities.

The Planning Visit also affords the Panel the opportunity to request any additional Supporting Materials, as well as put to the HEI any Matters for Clarification, this is, in their own words 'for them to have a better understanding of the HEI's performance in relation to the criteria' (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016)). At the heart of the process is public accountability, with the Panel having the right to request any and all information it requires so that it may perform its duties in as independent a manner as possible. This also includes having first-hand access to materials not 'vetted' by the HEI.

From the University's viewpoint the Planning Visit enabled it to seek explanation of what exactly was required in relation to additional Supporting Materials and the Matters for Clarification. Further, it afforded the University the opportunity to go over in detail its preparations for the visit itself, such as proposed room allocation and set-up and to receive the Panel's feedback on same. This meant that come the actual visit the rooms allocated to the Panel were to their requirements, saving both time and additional effort.

4. The Visit

The Standards Assessment Visit is perhaps the most visible part of the overall process and typically attracts most attention. However, it is important to recognise that it is only one part of the overall Standards Assessment process. The primary purpose of the Standards Assessment Visit is to help the ISA Panel verify the HEI's claims in relation to its ratings against standards and criteria....' (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016 p98).

The visit was conducted from 7 to 11 May 2023 (with the Accreditation Panel onsite from 8 to 11 May inclusive) with 17 separate interview sessions and around 160 staff, students and stakeholders being formally interviewed over the four-day period.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

As the ISA visit is over, reflection on the planning and the visit itself is warranted and beneficial for both A'Shariqyah University and those yet to take part in Stage 2of the Institutional Accreditation process, as well as for those with a professional interest in these matters. This reflection has highlighted a number of observations for consideration in the future, covering the role and composition of the Writing Team, Executive Management, Unit Heads and the University's employees. These include:

(2) The importance of having a small, dedicated Writing Team to present a finished document that spoke with one voice'. It would be preferable therefore to have a Writing Team or Committee of two or at most three persons. The members of such a team should also be given the opportunity to focus on the task at hand with all other work related duties suspended until the Application is completed, as this will aid in preventing delays to any deadlines set. It would also be preferable to have a Writing Team consisting of members from within the institution itself rather than an outside contractor/consultant as they would have far more knowledge concerning the current and past workings of the University.

(2) In addition, regular meetings with Executive Management and Unit Heads to revise and update the draft is key. The regular input and review of any draft Applications would help accelerate and improve the writing process. This will also afford the Writing Team the opportunity to listen to and adapt their writing to ensure all relevant material is covered corresponding to the work of each Unit in line with the requirements of the Standards. It also ensures that Unit Heads are continually being familiarised with the text of the Application.

(3) Adhering to deadlines is a crucial component of such a process in order to bring it to a successful and timely conclusion, especially in relation to submissions for the Application and the Supporting Materials. This would also include meeting deadlines of any project roadmap agreed to earlier by the oversight/planning Committee. It would assist greatly the work of any Writing Team/Committee if this was stressed by Executive Management from the outset and continually during the process itself until completion.

(4) Focal points from each Unit must be appointed to answer queries/provide data within a set turnaround period as a minimum requirement when drafting the Application. as delays at this stage lead to further work and ultimately may lead to a delay in producing the final version. The selected focal points should be familiar with the work of the concerned Unit and be active in delivering its operational targets.

The Accreditation process is a labour and time intensive undertaking, yet it gives impetus to and affords an HEI the opportunity of looking at its processes and activity in light of international and institutional standards. An HEI is forced to make an honest account of itself noting where it is doing well but also, more importantly, where it needs to improve for the future. This is not only good for the institution but also for future employees and above all, students. The process has also meant that those most involved have moved from having a superficial to practical level of understanding of the needs and requirements of ISA Accreditation; experience that will surely be most beneficial once the process is repeated again in five years' time.

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