

Evaluating Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation in SQU, Oman: Implementations, Progress and Achievements

Dr. Sufian Eltayeb Mohamed Abdel- Gadir¹

Abstract

Over the past three decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) over the globe have undergone extensive changes and reforms related to improving the quality of their education. Gulf Countries with no exception have shown an upward trend in implementing and adopting more stringent quality assurance measures and international accreditation standards and call for their higher education institutions to acquire program as well as institutional accreditation from national and international accreditation agencies.

Our present study aims at evaluating the experience of HEIs in one of the GCC countries namely, Sultanate of Oman, in the process of quality assurance and academic accreditation with special reference to the experience of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

SQU was established in 1986 as a fully state-owned university with five colleges. It offered only undergraduate program with an annual intake of 557 students. It now has nine colleges, four deanships, six support centers, three libraries, nine research centers, the SQU Hospital (SQUH), and offers 61 undergraduates, 59 Master's and 30 Ph.D. program. The total number of degrees awarded since the inception of the University is 37032 Bachelors, 1826 MDs, and 4241 Diplomas. The number of postgraduates has increased steadily over the years. 453 Masters Degrees and 34 Doctorates had been awarded by 2017

To have uniform quality management system for its public and private institutions the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) was established in 2001 through Royal Decree No. 74/2001. In 2010, a Royal Decree was issued establishing the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) and replacing the former Oman Accreditation Council (OAC). The OAAA was established to continue the efforts initiated by the OAC in the dissemination of a quality culture and accreditation of institutions and their programs.

Quality assurance at SQU is built within the University's missions, policies, practices and strategic plans that all aim at a continuous improvement process. Therefore, SQU is paying great attention to quality assurance and to institutional and program accreditation. The university has created a quality assurance office in 2010 and recently established a unit for quality assurance and academic accreditation in each college. This important concern led some colleges to get international institutional and program accreditation.

In 2009, SQU got institutional accreditation by Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) after submitting the "Institutional Standards Assessment Application" to get institutional accreditation from OAAA and fulfilling all the requirements of accreditation.

In this paper, we will discuss and analyze the achievements as well as the key challenges facing the implementations of quality assurance and accreditation procedures in both accredited and non-accredited colleges.

Key Words: Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Accreditation Agencies, SQU, Oman

Date of Submission: 25-06-2020

Date of Acceptance: 15-07-2020

I. Introduction

Educational institutions are the light houses of a society. They ensure a prosperous future. The development of any nation is directly proportional to the education, knowledge, creativity and skills of its citizens. The flowers will be bright and fruits will be sweet only if the plant gets appropriate nutrients from the soil. Just like manure improves soil quality, so does accreditation for any institution.

The main purpose of education is to give the right direction to an individual's life. We seek education to earn our livelihood and improve our living standard. A lot of hard-earned money and precious time goes in attaining an appropriate degree. The goal is accomplished only when this is attained from an authorized organization. Several "Degree Mills" are mushrooming up in every nook and corner of each country. Obtaining a degree from them is simply a waste of time and money. Knowledge-seekers must ensure that the institution

¹ Head, Quality Assurance & Academic Accreditation Unit, College of Law-Room 0045, Block G, Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 50, Al-khod P.C. 123, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Office phone: +968 24145327, Mobile phone: +968 95 973612, Email: sufian@squ.edu.om

they are trusting is well accredited from a renowned organization. Only then, they can have a stable career. The process of accreditation ensures quality and efficiency in an organization. Accreditation not only standardizes quality but also makes the place more organized, systematic and enhances the work environment. The more organized a place is, the better are the results.

Quality is every individual's responsibility and during the process of accreditation, this is achieved. The teachers, students and staff all join hands and work for the same goal to successfully obtain it.

The peer-relations amplify and the student-teacher bond strengthens.

Accreditation is done both at the national and international levels. It helps an institution to be acknowledged globally. This ensures enrollment from different parts of the world into the college leading to proper utilization of resources. The objectives of setting up an institution are thus met. Thus, to summarize, accreditation is the need of the hour for every institution.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Previous studies in accreditation

"Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement"(Eaton, 2006). The process is usually carried out by non-profit organizations specially created for this purpose. They are considered reliable authorities for quality assurance in an organization. Accreditation does not only assure quality but is also necessary for smooth transfer of students, courses and programs among colleges and universities.

Accreditation of institutions and programs takes place on a cycle that may range from every few years to as many as ten years. Accreditation is ongoing; (Eaton, 2006).

When an organization goes in for the process of accreditation, several steps are followed. The first step is Self-Study. In this initial step, a report is created where the institution drafts a summary of performance based on the accrediting standards set by the organization. Subsequently, a peer review is done. The colleagues review the self-study report and forward their suggestions for improvement. The next step comprises of the giant steps of site visit and judgement given by the accrediting organization. A commission is formed which constitutes members of faculty, students and administrators. This commission may affirm or deny accreditation on the basis of reports and evidences studied by them. They may also provide with a few suggestions and then reaffirm their verdict. A periodic external review is done then after.

Accreditation is a based on trust, standards, evidences, judgment and peer review (Eaton, 2006). Over the last decade, Accreditation has become a dominating factor in judging quality of an institution all around the world and especially in Europe. In addition to emerging public national systems for accreditation, private higher education accreditation agencies are increasingly visible in the European 'market' for higher education (Stensaker & Harvey, 2006).

The process of accreditation not only brings an institution at par with the rest of the world, but also maintains uniformity of courses and ease in student mobility. Currently, there is a sudden bloom in the accreditation agencies, as each Higher education institution wants itself to be accredited. A proper monitoring by the agency will definitely be fruitful.

In Europe, accreditation for quality assurance is tightly linked to the Bologna Process. To promote transparency, compatibility and comparability among the diverse higher education systems in Europe, the ministers of education of 29 countries signed the Bologna Declaration in June 1999. This document called for the establishment of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which would facilitate mobility and quality assurance, thereby making the recognition of credentials simpler. The declaration encouraged a delicate balance between national autonomy in quality assurance and an integrated European approach. This led to the establishment of 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (which now includes 40 states), published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (Sanyal & Martin, 2007).

2.2 Accreditation in Gulf

Integrating resources, exchanging experience, improving standards, and assuring high quality results, the GCC countries are striving hard to raise their bars and come at par with the rest of the world. Just a few years ago, the University of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates University, the University of Kuwait, Sultan Qaboos University, and the University of Qatar were the only national universities in their respective countries. Along with these national universities, a number of private colleges and institutions have also cropped up.

The GCC universities and colleges score a very low index in Times Higher Education (THE-QS) university rankings, the Academic Ranking of World Class Universities (WCU) of Shanghai Jio Tong University (SJTU) as well as the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities (Webometrics). This fact has compelled GCC institutions to take up Accreditation from the reputed agencies of Europe and U.S.

The Kuwait paper Development drafted the guidelines for the betterment of education in the Gulf region. It emphasized education for citizenship, enhance moderate views, remove extremism, achieve excellence in research and build models for knowledge management. To respond to these challenges, the GCC Supreme Council has summarized development plans as developing the curriculum and education processes, training teachers, governance and management of quality. At the individual GCC state level, many reforms, restructuring, modernization, quality and quantity enhancing measures have been undertaken in the higher education institutes and systems (Abouammoh, 2009). Although several steps have been taken in the direction of quality education, a wide rift still exists between GCC and the rest of the world.

2.3 Accreditation in Oman

The educational antiquity of the Sultanate of Oman has undergone speedy improvement. In 1970, the Sultanate had just three primary schools in the country with less than 1000 students and no college or university (Al Shmeli, 2009). Today, there are more than 62 higher education institutions run by private and public sector offering various programs. The total number of students in Higher Education in Oman in 2009 was approximately 80,000. Higher Education Institutions are owned and governed by a variety of entities, including the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Man Power, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, other governmental entities, and private owners (OAC, 2006). To monitor quality of each HEI, Oman Accreditation Council has been established (Al-Lamki, 2002).

The number of primary schools in Oman outpaced the number of Higher education institutes leading to a lack in supply and demand for higher education in the Sultanate. This yielded a large number of secondary school students to have limited opportunity for higher education and served as a major challenge in front of the government. It pressurized the institutions for increase in number of students and maintain an accountability for quality as well. Thus, competency for resources, accessibility, quality and performance has increased.

The emphasis of Standards Assessment is on empirically measuring whether an HEI has met the institutional quality standards published by the OAC (Carroll, Razvi, & Goodliffe, 2008) or not. This involves self-assessment and a summary of affirmations and recommendations in previous reports. An Accredited Provider Status is then conferred to the institution. In case this target is not achieved, the institution will be placed on probation for a period of 1 or 2 years. During this time, the institute will be expected to attend to all the recommendations. After successfully completing the guide lined suggestions, the status of Accredited is provided (Carroll et al., 2008).

In Oman, The Ministry of Higher Education implements and administers academic policies. This is done by a special tripartite secretary system for university education, technical education and vocational education. A separate unit for quality assurance and accreditation reports directly to the ministry and is responsible for maintenance of quality standards in education, teaching and research. An approval from OAA (Oman Academic Accreditation) in terms of challenges faced by universities helps to improvise the learning goals measurable as per Student Learning Outcomes. This traces the path to effective and efficient experience for learners, faculties and administrators at the university level.

Quality assurance is a precautionary strategy that ensures conformity of the products/ harvest/services of a meticulous structure with its predefined quality principles and qualifications (Tawafak, Mohammed, Arshah, & Romli, 2018). For a better adaptive environment at the Higher education institute level, the number of increased registered foreign students, international researchers, research collaborations and international conferences must be included. A standardized basic curriculum must be created.

A detailed insight into accreditation stages would enlist teaching tools and faculty experience as the prime factor. This needs to be evaluated by the Intended Learning Outcome and the actual Student Learning Outcome. It will set the ground for the next curriculum development and increased student achievements.

Innovation strategies are the key values to drive improvements and changes in formation of a knowledge-based society. A proper accreditation process ignites innovation and leads to creation of a skilled work-force (S Halibas, Ocier Sibayan, & Lyn Maata, 2017).

In 2001, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin said established (Royal Decree No. 74/2001) the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC), sending a very clear signal to the sector about the importance to be placed on the quality of higher education. The OAC is tasked with accrediting institutions and programs through the use of standards, information, reviews and quality improvement processes and with maintaining the national qualifications framework (Carroll, Razvi, Goodliffe, & Al- Habsi, 2009). Oman is a small higher education sector but, through its policy of importing programs from various countries, as well as developing its own, it serves as an interesting microcosm of the challenges being played out in the broader international higher education community (Carroll et al., 2009).

III. Quality Assurance and Accreditation in SQU

3.1 General information

Sultan Qaboos University is the leading university in Oman and is considered in top 10 universities in the GCC state (Al-Lamki, 2002). The university came into existence after the declaration of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said during the 10th anniversary of Oman's National Day in November 1980. The university started with five colleges in its campus in the year 1986 and has not looked back since then. It only offered undergraduate programs with a meagre student intake of 557 students. Now, there are nine colleges, four deanships, six support centers, three libraries, nine research centers, the SQU Hospital (SQUH), and offers 61 undergraduates, 59 Master's and 30 Ph.D. programs. It is the best in Oman but has to work harder in order to comply with the world standards. The hunger for getting recognized world over instilled in Sultan Qaboos University as well. This led to the colleges getting accreditation from the leading agencies from Europe, Canada and U.S.A.

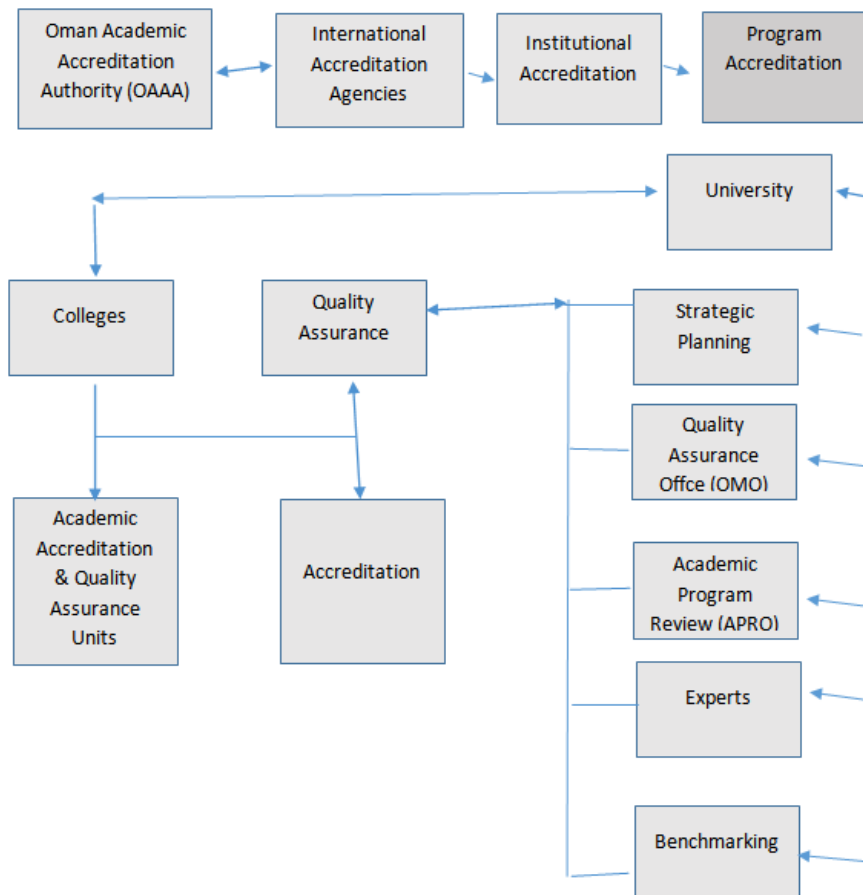
3.2 SQU Efforts towards Academic Accreditation

3.2.1 Quality Policy

Since its inception in 1986, SQU has adopted effective quality assurance policies. There has been a consistent commitment to high standards through internal and external quality assurance mechanisms (Figure 1). The University's programmes have been evaluated over the last 20 years through the following mechanisms:

- Major institutional evaluation by teams of international experts in 1991, 1998, 2005 and 2009;
- Annual evaluation of the academic programmes by external examiners since 1990;
- Establishment of the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) in February 2010 <http://www.squ.edu.om/qao>, to coordinate efforts towards achieving quality programmes and in all processes in the University;
- Establishment of the Academic Programme Review Office (APRO) in 2014 to review all undergraduate academic programmes at SQU.

Figure 1: Quality Assurance mechanisms and processes in Sultan Qaboos University



3.2.2 Strategic planning 2016 – 2040

SQU has developed a strategic plan (2016–2040), in accordance with Oman’s National Education Strategy 2040. This plan provides the framework within which the various units (Colleges, Deanships, Centers, and Administrative Departments) have developed their strategic plans in the period up to 2040. The following five strategic domains (focus areas) have been identified in the plan:

1. Undergraduate teaching and learning
2. Postgraduate teaching and learning
3. Research
4. Creativity and innovation
5. Community engagement

To facilitate and ensure attainment of the strategic goals of the five domains, seven areas have been identified as enablers: 1. Governance and management 2. Financial capacity 3. Human resources 4. International collaboration 5. Student environment 6. Infrastructure and support services and 7. SQUH health and medical services

To achieve the University’s vision, the following questions were posed:

- What are the envisioned outcomes of each domain/enabler? Strategic goals
- What are the approaches to be adopted to realize the strategic goals? Strategies
- What are the specific mechanisms to be adopted to translate the strategies into actions? initiatives

For each strategic domain and goal, there is a strong emphasis on continuous quality improvement as a core organizational development strategy. This encompasses quality assurance, quality enhancement and preparation for accreditation with either a national agency or international accreditation body. To attain the strategic goal, strategies were developed and a set of initiatives for each strategy were formulated. To ensure the realization of the University’s vision, five consecutive medium-term operational plans were developed for all units of the University using the approved strategic goals, strategies and initiatives of the long-term plan (2016 – 2040). The first operational plan 2016–2020 will be followed by four five-year plans.

3.2.3 Academic Program Review (APRO)

According to SQU Academic Program Review (APR) policy, the objectives of the APR:

- Align academic programs with SQU mission and objectives
- Appraise the effectiveness of academic programs in achieving student outcomes • Assist in enhancing and improving the program
- Assist in planning the future of the program
- Comply with national and international quality standards
- The APR process will bring many benefits, such as:
- Disseminate good practice amongst SQU academic programs
- Assure the public of SQU graduates’ qualification
- Identify areas for improvement
- Prepare academic programs for accreditation

The office of academic program review usually ask for self-study report. All academic programmes in SQU are subject to mandatory review every four years a detailed self-Study Report using a common template provided by APRO. After submitting the report to the director of academic program review who in return forward it to an External Assessors .The External Assessors reviewing student assessment against course objectives, meeting with students as well as faculty members and attending inaugural and exit meetings with the Dean of the College and the DVCAACS. They submit finally reports to the DVCAACS with constructive recommendations. The Departments concerned discuss the reports and the actions taken to address the recommendations are conveyed to the DVCAACS.

3.3 Institutional and Program Accreditation Achievements

3.3.1 Institutional Accreditation

Institutional accreditation: The process of external quality review and self-study of an institution for quality assurance and quality improvement. The process is intended to determine if an institution has met published standards for accreditation and is meeting its mission and stated purposes. It results in accreditation, denial of accreditation, or probation (or related status).

For SQU’s Institutional Accreditation process, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) is the accreditor that has been charged based on Royal Decree No. 54/2010. OAAA is responsible for regulating the quality of the higher educational institutions in Oman. OAAA’s Institutional accreditation process involves three phases: Quality Audit, Standards Assessment and Outcome. SQU succeeded in achieving the institutional accreditation in 2018 for a five year round ending in n2023.

3.3.2 Program Accreditation

The primary focus of program accreditation is individual academic and professional programs. The process usually involves a self-assessment of the program by the institution, a site visit by peer reviewers, a report of that review, and a decision to accredit, deny accreditation, or put it on probation (or some other intermediary status). Seven out of nine college of SQU have been accredited (See Table 1 below). The remaining two colleges namely College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences (CAMS) and the college of law are waiting the decision of accreditation.

The process of accreditation has been started recently and the first college to be accredited was College of Medicine and health Sciences in the year 2013.

For the college of engineering , all eight engineering programmes: Architectural, Chemical and Process, Civil, Electrical and Computer, Industrial, Mechanical, Mechatronics, and Petroleum and Natural Gas Engineering programmes were accredited by the USA-based accreditation body, ABET in 2014. The United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO Ted. Qual] has accredited the tourism programme in College of Art and Social Sciences in 2013, and the World Federation accredited the medical programme for Medical Education in 2013. The College of Education was accredited by CAEP previously NCAT in 2016 and the College of Nursing was accredited by the ACEN in 2016. The CSC (Chemistry) in 2014, the GSL (Geology and Geophysics) in 2014, and the ASIIN (Biology) accredited a number of programmes in the College of Science in 2016.

Table 1: List of Accredited Programs in SQU

No.	Name of the College	Program	Accreditation Agency	Status	Remark
1.	College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences (CAMS)	Undergraduate Programs	Agriculture Institute of Canada (AIC)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision (2019)
		Agricultural Engineering	Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision (2019)
2.	College of Engineering (CENG)	Undergraduate Program	Engineering Accreditation Commission (EAC) of ABET	Accredited	Accredited from August 2014 to July 2020 (6 years)
3.	College of Economics and Political Science (CEPS)	Undergraduate Program	The European Foundation for Management Development (EQUIS)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision (December 2018)
		Postgraduate Program			
4.	College of Medicine and Health Science (CoMHS)	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Association for Medical Education in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (AMEEMR) in cooperation with the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME)	Accredited	Accredited from November 2013 to October 2013 (10 years)
		Biomedical Sciences (BMS) Program	Institute of Biomedical Science, London, UK	Accredited	Accredited from October 2015 to September 2019 (4 years)
5.	College of Law (CLAW)	Undergraduate Program	Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA)	Accredited	Accredited from June 2019 to Spring 2024 (5 years)
6.	College of Nursing (CON)	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN)	Accredited	Accredited from April 2016 to 2020 (4 years)
		Master of Science in Nursing		In progress	Pending accreditation decision (October 2020)
		Nursing Education Clinical Simulation Unit	Society for Simulation in Healthcare (SSH)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision (2019)
7.	College of Education (COE)	B.Ed. in Early Childhood Education	National Council for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)-SPA	Accredited	Accredited from May 2016 to August 2023 (7 years)
		B.Ed. in Science	National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)-SPA	Accredited	(NCATE) Accredited from May 2016 to April 2023 (7 years)

		B.Ed. in English Language	American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)-SPA	Accredited	Accredited from May 2016 to August 2023 (7 years)
		B.Ed. in Instructional and Learning Technologies	National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) currently called CAEP	Accredited	Accredited from May 2016 to April 2023 (7 years)
		B.Ed. in Mathematics	National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)-SPA	Accredited	Accredited in May 2016. Recognized from (NCTM) until August 1, 2022. Pending accreditation decision
		B.Ed. in Physical Education	National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) currently called CAEP	Accredited	Accredited from May 2016 to August 2023 (7 years)
		B.Ed. in Islamic Education			
		B.Ed. in Arabic Language			
		B.Ed. in Art Education			
		Psychology – Higher Diploma in Career Counseling			
		Psychology – Higher Diploma in Learning Disabilities			
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching Islamic Education	National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) currently called CAEP	Accredited	Accredited from May 2016 to May 2023 (7 years)
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching Arabic Education			
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching English Language			
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching Science			
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching Mathematics			
		M.Ed. in Curriculum & Teaching Social Studies			
		M.Ed. in Educational Administration			
			Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC)-SPA	ELCC) In progress	Pending accreditation decision in 2018
8.	College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS)	English Language and Literature, (BA)	Program review by the Office of Program Review (APRO), at SQU.	Reviewed	Program reviewed on March 2017.
		Translation (BA)		In progress	Pending accreditation decision (November 2018)
		Arabic (BA)		Reviewed	Reviewed on November 2017
		Mass Communication (BA)	Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Program (AQAS)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision (January 2018)
		Music and		Accredited	Accredited from July 2017

		Musicology (BA)			to June 2022 (5 years)
		Geography (BA)		Accredited	Accredited from July 2017 to June 2022 (5 years)
		Tourism (BA)		Accredited	Accredited from April 2016 to March 2021 (5 years)
		History (BA)		In progress	Pending accreditation decision (January 2018)
		Sociology (BA)	Accreditation Agency for Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS)	Accredited	Accredited from July 2017 to June 2022 (5 years)
		Social Works (BA)			
		Information Studies (BA)	Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional (CILIP)	Accredited	Accredited from July 2017 to June 2022 (5 years)
		Information Studies (MSc)			
		Geography (MSc)	Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Program (AQAS)	Accredited	Accredited from May 2017 to April 2021 (4 years)
		Mass Communication (MSc)		In progress	Pending accreditation decision (February 2018)
		History (MSc & PhD)			
		Sociology (MSc)	Accreditation Agency for Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS)	Accredited	Accredited from July 2017 to June 2021 (4 years)
		Social Works (MSc)			
9.	College of Science (CoS)	Bachelor of Science in Chemistry	Canadian Society for Chemistry (CSC)	Accredited	Accredited from June 2014 to June 2019 (5 years)
		Bachelor of Science in Earth Sciences	The Geological Society, London (GSL)	Accredited	Accredited from November 2014 to October 2020 (6 years)
		Bachelor of Science in Geophysics			
		Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology	Accreditation Agency for Study Programs in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences, and Mathematics (ASIIN e. V.)	Accredited	Accredited from January 2017 to September 2021 (4 years)
		Bachelor of Science in Environmental Biology			
		Bachelor of Science in Physics		In progress	Pending accreditation decision
		Bachelor of Science in Mathematics			
		Bachelor of Science in Statistics			
		Bachelor of Science in Computer Science	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET)	Accredited	October 2015
		Master of Science in Chemistry	Royal Society of Chemistry	Accredited	Accredited from January 2016 to 2020 (4 years)
		Master of Science in Physics	Accreditation Agency for Study Programs in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences, and Mathematics (ASIIN e.V.)	In progress	Pending accreditation decision

IV. Quality Assurance and Accreditation Challenges

4.1.1 Cost of accreditation and audits

Assessing the cost of accreditation and audits proved to be a difficult task. Very little research has been done on the cost of accreditation. Some costs such as site visits (travel, lodging, meals) are clear-cut. Similarly, the honoraria paid to peer reviewers can be calculated. The budgets of the quality assurance agencies are also public information in most places so those costs can be identified. However, there are many subtle costs, especially regarding preparation of self-studies, site visits, follow-up, administrative preparation costs, expenditures made to try to meet standards, and others expenses that are difficult to identify. Many of these

costs are hidden. For example, how do you count the time of faculty members who serve on the self-assessment committees? Is this part of their normal duties and thus has no cost? If that is the case, how you factor in the opportunity costs, which result, for example, in a decrease in publications for those involved. Peter & Righetti, 2010)

4.1.2 Student assessment

Student assessment practices are weak because of emphases on memory recall of knowledge rather than practices that assess higher-level cognitive skills; which reflects a teaching culture that is inadequate to prepare students for the critical thinking skills necessary to compete at the same level as graduates from higher quality HEI systems. Creating or adapting learning assessment tools that are appropriate, fair, and easily understood by both faculty and students. What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed (Biggs, 1999). Quality assurance and enhancement systems at the institutional level are still in the minority and a culture of quality assessment in which annual feedback, evaluation and monitored actions plans are the norm has not yet evolved.

4.1.3 Faculty

The faculty of HEIs are characterized by many shortcomings. The need for professional development and skills-based training, especially in technology and participative-teaching techniques, is widespread throughout the region. Another challenge of academic accreditation was resistance to change. A minority of faculty members at a given age showed their resistance to coping with the wave of change that was taking place. They considered it a burden besides their normal duties of teaching. Updating their courses according to accreditation agency standards required them to renew and update their knowledge and information.

V. Conclusions

This paper has intended to shed some light on the process of quality assurance and academic accreditation at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Over the past few years, SQU have made great efforts towards improving the quality of its academic programs. To this end, it succeeded in achieving both institutional accreditation by OAAA and academic Accreditation for most academic programs by an international accreditation agensis.

Moreover, to ensure continuous quality improvement SQU should pay more attention to balancing the cost of accreditation with the cost of faculty time. In addition, updating curricula and student assessment are important for ensuring quality.

References

- [1]. Abouammoh, A. M. (2009). The Role of Education: Trends of Reforms and EU-GCC Understanding Center for Higher Education Research and Studies (CHERS) The Role of Education: Trends of Reforms and EU-GCC Understanding.
- [2]. Al-Lamki, S. M. (2002). Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: The challenge of access, equity and privatization. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 24(1), 75–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800220130770>
- [3]. Al Shmeli, H. (2009). Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Planning in Context of Globalization. *IIEP Policy Forum*, 2-3 July 2009. 2(2), 9–18.
- [4]. Carroll, M., Razvi, S., & Goodliffe, T. (2008). Oman Accreditation Council Quality Audit Manual. *Quality Audit Manual – Institutional Accreditation: Stage 1*. Retrieved from <http://www.oac.gov.om>
- [5]. 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*, 15(1), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320902731328>
- [6]. Eaton, J. S. (2006). *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation*. Washington, DC.
- [7]. Peter & Righetti, 2010), *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Volume 5 Number 1 2010, www.worldwords.uk/RCIE
- [8]. Prigent, R. (1990). *La préparation d'un cours*. Montréal, QC: Éditions de l'École Polytechnique de Montréal.
- [9]. S Halibas, A., Ocier Sibayan, R., & Lyn Maata, R. (2017). The Penta Helix Model of Innovation in Oman: An HEI Perspective. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management*, 12, 159–174. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3735>
- [10]. Sanyal, B. C., & Martin, M. (2007). *QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION: AN OVERVIEW*. In Report: Higher Education in the World 2007: Accreditation for Quality Assurance: What is at Stake? (pp. 3–17).
- [11]. Stensaker, B., & Harvey, L. (2006). Old Wine in New Bottles? A Comparison of Public and Private Accreditation Schemes in Higher Education. *Higher Education Policy*, 19(1), 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300110>
- [12]. Tawafak, R. M., Mohammed, M. N., Arshah, R. bin A., & Romli, A. (2018). Review on the Effect of Student Learning Outcome and Teaching Technology in Omani's Higher Education Institution's Academic Accreditation Process. In Proceedings of the 2018 7th International Conference on Software and Computer Applications - ICSCA 2018 (pp. 243–247). New York, New York, USA: ACM Press. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3185089.3185108>