OAAA
Program Standards
Conceptual Design Framework

February 2014
Draft v2.0
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Summary of Changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v1</td>
<td>Janice Ross</td>
<td>12/9/2013</td>
<td>Original document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v1.2</td>
<td>Janice Ross</td>
<td>9/10/2013</td>
<td>- Minor editorial amendments to text in v1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Addition of benchmark agencies and Fundamental Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Modification to the section setting out the proposed outcomes of program accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Major amendments: Terminology updated to reflect shift from area → standard; standard → criteria; and criteria → indicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Appendix A Acronyms added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 2.0</td>
<td>Janice Ross</td>
<td>2/20/2014</td>
<td>- Section 1 editorial amendments to text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 2.1 ROSQA, the NQF and Classification of Institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 2.3 Relationship between Program Licensure and Program Accreditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Addition of Figure 1: Overview of the Program Standards Assessment Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Section 3: Minor amendments to text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Section 3.2 Amended section to include details on additional benchmark organisations; and supporting text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 3.2 A National System of Program Accreditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 3.4 The Scope of Program Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 3.5 Institutional Accreditation and Program Accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Section 5 Fundamental Principles – amendment of text for clarification:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.3 Clarification on program criteria/standards that are ‘not applicable’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.7 Clarification on use of generic program standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.8 Clarification on General Foundation and Health programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.12 Clarification on pre-requisites for program accreditation applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.13 Clarification on the status of foreign/overseas programs in relation to OAAA program accreditation; and change of terminology from ‘foreign/overseas’ to ‘affiliate’ programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5.15 Clarification on use of peer review panels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Section 6 Amendment to table to clarify the status of ‘indicators’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Section 7 Outcomes of the program accreditation process: Significantly revised and developed section to set out in full the approach to program Standards Assessment, including: 7.1 Rating against the Criteria; 7.2 Rating against the Standards; and 7.3 Standards Assessment Outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New Section 8 Public reporting and comparability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Updating of Appendix A: Acronyms and ToC added</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 4
2. Background .......................................................................................................................... 5
   2.1. ROSQA, the Classification of Institutions and the NQF ........................................... 6
   2.2. Program Accreditation overview .................................................................................. 6
   2.3 Relationship between Program Licensure and Program Accreditation ...................... 7
3. Developmental process for the Conceptual Design Framework and Program Standards.... 8
   3.1. Approach to benchmarking ......................................................................................... 9
   3.2. Benchmarking of Program Standards ......................................................................... 9
   3.3 A national system of Program Accreditation ............................................................... 12
   3.4 The scope of Program Standards ............................................................................... 14
   3.5 Institutional Accreditation and Program Accreditation .............................................. 15
4. What does it mean for programs in Oman to be accredited? ............................................ 16
   4.1. Key characteristics of accreditation ........................................................................... 16
   4.2. Defining Program Standards .................................................................................... 17
5. Fundamental principles of Program Accreditation ........................................................... 18
6. Organisation of the Program Standards ........................................................................... 24
7. Outcomes of the Program Accreditation process ............................................................... 25
   7.1. Rating against the Criteria ......................................................................................... 25
   7.2 Rating against the Standards ...................................................................................... 26
   7.3 Standards Assessment outcomes ................................................................................. 28
   7.4 Probation ...................................................................................................................... 29
   7.5 Appeals process .......................................................................................................... 29
8. Public Reporting and Comparability ............................................................................... 29
Appendix A  Acronyms ........................................................................................................... 30
1. Introduction

The Royal Decree 54/2010, which established the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA\(^1\)), states that the role of the OAAA is to regulate the quality of higher education to ensure that it meets with international standards; and to encourage HEIs to improve the quality of their provision. The Decree also called for the OAAA to develop and update the process for program accreditation. The periodic review of standards and processes is also considered to be good practice by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The OAAA therefore needs to review the relevance, robustness and currency of its program standards and accreditation procedures.

The OAAA’s Mission is consistent with its Royal Decree 54/2010 as it strives ‘to encourage and support the Omani higher education sector in meeting international standards; to maintain the national qualifications framework; and, through a transparent rigorous system of institutional and program accreditation, provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman’.

In 2003-04, the OAAA developed the ‘Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ (ROSQA\(^2\)). ROSQA set out standards and criteria to be used in both program and institutional accreditation, along with procedural guides for these accreditation processes (see Section 2, ‘Background’).

There is currently significant demand from the Omani higher education (HE) sector for the OAAA to develop and implement a national system of program accreditation. The ROSQA program criteria\(^3\) and processes for accreditation need to be reviewed in the light of a number of contextual factors: the Ministry of Higher Education program licensing process; the need to align with the scope of the institutional accreditation process, and the revised institutional standards; and the need to incorporate drivers of quality improvement into the model. Aligned to this, the revision of the ROSQA program criteria would benefit from extensive benchmarking with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and international accreditation models and program standards.

\(^1\)A list of acronyms can be found in Appendix A
\(^2\) ROSQA can be downloaded from: [http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Oman_ROSQA%20%28all%20part%20one%29.pdf](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Oman_ROSQA%20%28all%20part%20one%29.pdf)
\(^3\) Note on terminology: The ROSQA (2004) ‘Guide for Programme Accreditation’ refers to the ‘criteria to be used in evaluating programmes’. Where appropriate, these ROSQA criteria have been used, along with other benchmarks, to inform the development of criteria which underpin the new draft program standards. It is important that readers of this paper to distinguish between the previous ‘ROSQA programme criteria’ and the new proposed ‘program standards criteria’.
In reviewing both standards and the accreditation process, the OAAA’s aim is to produce a comprehensive set of generic program standards (see Section 5.7 for a discussion of generic program standards) and a process to assess programs against these. This review recognises the importance of setting out the underpinning conceptual design framework for program accreditation, and also the need for a Program Accreditation Manual and other supporting documentation.

The Royal Decree 54/2010 called on the OAAA to collaborate with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in developing and updating the program accreditation process. The review of program standards and the associated program accreditation process incorporates extensive consultation: with HEI representatives (through the OAAA Consultative Committee); with the Ministry of Higher Education, and also the ministries of Manpower, Health and Defense and other external stakeholders. The OAAA has also consulted with an appointed international panel of experts, whose role is to provide feedback to the OAAA on all aspects of the draft standards and proposed accreditation process. A major feature of the consultation process has been the OAAA National Symposium on Institutional and Program Standards, held in October 2013.

2. Background

The ROSQA standards, criteria and procedural guides for institutional and program accreditation were developed in 2003-04. Two HEIs underwent the institutional and program accreditation process in 2004-05 using ROSQA. In 2006, the draft Quality Plan\(^4\) proposed major changes to ROSQA (for further discussion of the Quality Plan, see also Sections 5.7 and 5.13) Following this, it was decided that the ROSQA standards should be reviewed and a two-stage institutional accreditation process was introduced in order to allow capacity in the sector to be developed. ROSQA program criteria now need to be reviewed and revised in line with good practice, and in the context of the developing Omani HE landscape.

This review process includes extensive benchmarking with a range of international and regional program standards models (many of which were not available at the time ROSQA was developed). The revision of ROSQA’s program criteria and the approach to program accreditation has provided an opportunity for effective consultation with the sector, other relevant stakeholders and to seek feedback from international reviewers. It is important that ‘ownership’ of program accreditation is fostered in the sector, so as to encourage capacity-building, as the sector develops over time.

In 2011, the OAAA Board approved the OAAA’s approach to taking forward preliminary work on the development of the program accreditation process. The OAAA Board confirmed the aim of the program standards project is ‘…to build on work detailed in ROSQA and the draft Quality

Plan to develop and implement a program accreditation process which addresses current needs effectively and reflects current regional and international best practice’.

2.1. ROSQA, the Classification of Institutions and the NQF

In addition to the standards and procedural guidelines, ROSQA included two fundamental elements, both of which remain current as part of these revised arrangements. These are the Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, and Oman’s National Qualifications Framework.

The Classification of Institutions of Higher Education\(^5\) sets the requirements for designating an institution as an Institute of Higher Education. It further specifies what kinds of institutions may be recognised as universities, university colleges, and college of higher education. The classification system includes a clear distinction between the criteria for universities, university colleges, and for colleges of higher education. ROSQA states that, irrespective of the classification of an institution offering an award, the standards for a given academic award are the same. These standards are specified in the Oman’s National Qualifications Framework.

Royal Decree 54/2010 states that the OAAA is responsible for developing and maintaining the National Academic Qualifications Framework in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education and other relevant authorities. The National Qualifications Framework\(^6\) included in ROSQA remains a key part of Oman’s system for quality assurance, as it sets the standards for academic awards for all categories of institutions. The framework identifies six levels of awards, four at undergraduate level and two at postgraduate level. Standards for academic awards are expressed as student outcomes (achievements) at each level: student knowledge; cognitive skills; general competencies; and (at level two and above) graduate qualities. In addition, the Qualifications Framework sets out for each level or title of award the normal expectations in terms of: credit points; credit hours; and minimum duration of study. The Qualifications Framework is designed to provide consistency in program requirements and award titles, as well as to provide equivalence of standards in comparison with respected HEIs internationally. As such, it remains a central reference point in the design, monitoring and review of academic programs.

2.2. Program Accreditation overview

The process of program accreditation follows, where applicable, licensing/approval for a program to operate in Oman by the Ministry of Higher Education (for private HEIs) or other relevant ministries. The OAAA’s role is to accredit programs against national standards. The process will include programs where the award is conferred by an affiliate university (see Section 5.13, for the discussion on overseas affiliate programs).

---

\(^5\) ROSQA, (2004), Part One, Section I, Chapter One.
\(^6\) ROSQA, (2004), Part One, Section I, Chapter Two.
Figure 1 provides an overview of the program accreditation process. All programs will undergo the program Standards Assessment process. Accredited programs will undergo re-accreditation on a five-year cycle. Programs that do not achieve accreditation in the first instance will be placed on probation, and will undergo program standards reassessment. Where standards reassessment indicates that standards remain not met, but good progress has been shown, programs will be placed on a further round of probation. If the program undergoes program standards reassessment and still does not meet the standards, and insufficient progress is shown, then the program will not be accredited, and the accreditation process will be terminated (please also see Section 7.3).

2.3 Relationship between Program Licensure and Program Accreditation

The Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for the licensing of academic programs in private universities and colleges. One of the main responsibilities of the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges (Ministry of Higher Education) is to supervise Oman’s private universities and colleges. In doing so, Its duties include supervising the implementation of conditions that academic programs are required to meet.

The application process for program licensing identifies the information required when an HEI applies to launch a new program (including the ‘modification of an existing program’). Information on the program curriculum; program benchmarking; current and future planned staffing; and physical facilities and other resources are required. Overall, the focus of MoHE licensing is primarily on the feasibility and capacity of the proposed program, and to ensure that the program is designed to meet international norms and good practice.

The purpose of OAAA program accreditation is to determine whether a program has met or has exceeded the OAAA’s published standards. In doing so, program accreditation is making a judgment on the standards of a program, once it is fully operational. Thus, MOHE program licensing and OAAA program accreditation fulfill different but equally important functions.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between program licensure and program accreditation. As illustrated while program licensure applies to new programs, HEIs will be able to apply for program accreditation only once the program is established, and after graduation of the first student cohort. In the first instance, when an HEI applies for program accreditation, there are two possible overall outcomes to that process: firstly, that the standards have been met, and the HEI is awarded a Program Accreditation Certificate; the second possible overall outcome is that the standards have not been met, and the program is placed ‘on probation’. In these circumstances, program licensure remains current. If the program subsequently undergoes Program Standards Reassessment and still does not meet the standards, and insufficient progress is shown, then the program will not be accredited. The OAAA will inform the relevant supervising ministry which will respond to the accreditation decision in line with its own policies. The OAAA will also notify the Education Council of the accreditation outcome (see also Section 7.3).
ROSQA (2004)\(^7\) set out the requirements for HEIs to report both major and minor changes to programs to the responsible Ministry, and provides guidance on what might constitute such changes. OAAA will work closely with the Ministry of Higher Education and other supervising ministries to ensure that there is a shared approach to the requirements on HEIs to report changes to accredited programs, and the implications for accreditation status.

**Figure 1 Overview of the Program Accreditation Process**

### 3. Developmental process for the Conceptual Design Framework and Program Standards

What processes have been used to develop these draft standards? In order to fulfill the requirements of the Royal Decree 54/2010 for Oman’s HEIs to meet international standards, a key element of the program standards review process is benchmarking. The OAAA’s approach has been benchmarked against an extensive range of regional and international higher education accrediting bodies, quality assurance agencies, professional bodies and other organisations concerned with higher education quality assurance and improvement.

---

\(^7\) ROSQA (2004), Section IX b) Changes in Programmes: Major and Minor Changes
3.1. Approach to benchmarking

The program standards benchmarking exercise involved two broad areas of work: firstly, benchmarking the scope and detail of program standards; and secondly, benchmarking the design of the accreditation process. In detail, the benchmarking covers:

- High-level ‘vision’ of the role of program accreditation, and principles of the approach to developing program standards
- Key concepts, definitions, terminology
- Parameters of program accreditation (for example, is it time-limited?)
- Scope i.e. broad areas/topics covered
- Detailed program standards (including the use of ‘enhanced standards’ or ‘stretch targets’)
- Degree of alignment with institutional standards and the institutional accreditation process
- Expectations regarding institutions’ use of external reference points in developing their programs, including qualifications frameworks and benchmarks.
- The extent to which the methods work with/incorporate foreign programs, affiliates and other professional and/or accrediting bodies
- The decision-making process of accreditation panels, and how conclusions are formed
- The nature of judgement-making and outcomes (for example, is there a requirement to meet all standards; are there graded outcomes?)
- Program accreditation methodology (operational detail on the implementation of the process)
- Reporting the outcomes of program accreditation.

3.2. Benchmarking of Program Standards

The first step was to map the ROSQA program criteria against the institutional accreditation scope, as set out in the Quality Audit Manual8 - ROSQA covers some 24 criteria across seven areas of provision while the institutional accreditation scope covers some 75 topics across nine areas. This mapping exercise demonstrated that there are some significant areas of alignment between the ROSQA program criteria and the accreditation scope. The strongest area of alignment was in the accreditation scope areas of student learning by coursework; and academic support services. Additionally, there was partial alignment in the areas of: governance and management; industry and community engagement; student and student support services; and staff and staff support services. The areas of least alignment were in those of student learning by research; staff research and consultancy; and general support services and facilities. This preliminary exercise was valuable in that it demonstrated that the ROSQA program criteria remain a firm foundation which can be brought forward into the program standards accreditation process, through updating and development. Thus, the ROSQA

---

program criteria have been, on the whole, retained and, while some of these have been rephrased, their original intent remains.

The accreditation scope and the ROSQA program criteria were then benchmarked against program standards currently used by some 15 international higher education accreditation bodies/agencies and professional bodies. Additionally, cognisance was taken of a number of quality assurance agencies and other HE sector organisations that, while not accrediting bodies per se, have a key role in setting expectations of good practice with regard to quality assurance, quality improvement and the student learning experience.

The process of developing program standards and the program accreditation method has been an iterative one, and as these have been developed, further benchmark agencies and organisations have been considered. For example, responding to feedback, the number and range of benchmark organisations used has been extended, with a further nine organisations employed. This brings the total number of benchmarks used to 26 organisations. Benchmarking against the requirements of a range of accreditation bodies has been used in the development of a number of elements of the OAAA’s approach to program accreditation, including: the case for a national system of program accreditation; the scope of program accreditation; program accreditation models; the guidance provided to HEIs in preparing a program accreditation submission; and regulations concerning changes to accredited programs.

These benchmarks used included:

- ABET Engineering Accreditation Commission, USA
- Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA, New Zealand)
- Accreditation Agency for Degree Programmes in Engineering, Informatics/Computer Science, the Natural Sciences and Mathematics (ASIIN; Germany)
- Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (USA)*
- American Psychological Association – Commission on Accreditation (APA-CoA; USA)*
- Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (USA)
- British Accreditation Council (BAC), United Kingdom*
- Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), United Arab Emirates*9
- Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS; Australia)*
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; USA)
- Engineering Accreditation Commission (EAC), USA
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
- European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) (EPAS Business and Management; EQUIS International Business Schools)

9 An asterisk * indicates that the benchmark has been used in the development of both institutional and program standards.
The program standards developed by a number of GCC higher education quality bodies were used because, like Oman, these countries are experiencing rapid growth in their higher education sectors and are at similar stages of development. The MQA standards provide a useful example of requiring certain standards (‘benchmark standards’) to be met, and also identifying suggested ‘stretch’ standards (‘enhanced standards’) to encourage excellence within the Malaysian sector. The EKKA, along with the CAA, illustrate approaches which cover both standards for initial accreditation and also for re-accreditation, and thus provide a reference point to the standards by which both proposed new and established programs may be evaluated. The EKKA standards also have the benefit of having been recently developed and benchmarked extensively.

The TEQSA standards were selected because they represent a set of relatively recent (2011) accreditation standards. Similarly, the benchmarking exercise drew on the QAA’s ‘Quality Code’, which has recently been revised and updated (2011 onwards). While QAA is not an accrediting body per se, its mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of higher education, and the Quality Code is the definitive reference point in the UK for all those involved in delivering higher education. The Quality Code makes clear what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of all higher education institutions. The benchmarking exercise also considered the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’10 (2009), which seeks to establish a widely-shared set of values, expectations and good practice across the European Higher Education Area. A number of professional accrediting bodies were also considered, so that the benchmarking exercise included reference points relevant to professional education.

As indicated above, the number and range of benchmarks has been extended as the program standards and accreditation project has progressed. In response to feedback from the October 2013 National Symposium, and wider consultation feedback, a number of USA accrediting bodies have been incorporated into the benchmarking activity. Also responding to consultation feedback, further European and SE Asian benchmarks have been employed (ASIIN, Germany; NBA, India).

There is a strong core of commonality across the benchmarks used for the drafting of both program and institutional standards (indicated by an *). This ensures a strong alignment of the institutional and program standards, both in their detail, and in the principles underpinning the standards at the two levels of the institution. In practice, a small number of the accrediting bodies used in benchmarking institutional standards were not used for benchmarking program standards, as they do not operate program-level accreditation systems (for example, some of the USA accrediting bodies11).

3.3 A national system of Program Accreditation

There is a strong case to be made for a national system of program accreditation in Oman. Indeed, the Royal Decree 52/2010 calls on the OAAA to develop and update the process for program accreditation. Elsewhere in the GCC, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (UAE)12 notes that, with the increasing international mobility of students, a robust national system of accreditation is essential to ensure qualifications of a high quality and good standing in the international community.

It has been noted that, globally, there is an increasing number of schemes for accrediting higher education institutions and programs. A growing emphasis on accreditation schemes is seen to reflect a number of developments in higher education, including the emergence of new HEIs, and the growing internationalisation of the higher education sector.13 There are also different types of accreditation bodies (for example, agencies, councils, commissions), which may focus on general accreditation, specialised accreditation, professional accreditation, regional accreditation, national accreditation, or distance education accreditation.14

The prevalence of accreditation bodies, while representing choice for HEIs seeking accreditation of their institution or programs, creates a very complex accreditation landscape.

---

11 The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).
Accreditation bodies will vary in their scope, apply standards which vary in their detail, use different assessment processes, and deliver outcomes that are different in their meaning.

For the prospective or current student, employers and the wider public, this makes it difficult to form a clear view of the merits of an institution or program, and to make helpful comparisons. For other stakeholders, such as government or ministries, it is difficult to form a clear overview of the quality of the higher education sector.

Additionally, the growth in accreditation bodies is also seen to include both public and private accreditation schemes. A notable distinction between the public and private accreditation schemes concerns access to information about both the accreditation process and its outcomes. Public schemes tend to be more open. Private schemes tend to strictly limit public insight about what has led to a particular accreditation decision.\(^\text{15}\)

It is also recognised that some accreditation bodies are more rigorous than others. For example, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; USA) has a recognition process for accrediting bodies. Recognition by CHEA affirms that the standards and processes of the accrediting organisation are consistent with the academic quality, improvement and accountability expectations that CHEA has established\(^\text{16}\).

A national system of program accreditation also protects HEIs (and correspondingly, current and prospective students) from the downfalls of ‘accreditation mills’, which is bogus accrediting agencies that award accreditation to HEIs or programs, without requiring the HEI to meet appropriate quality standards. Thus, the accreditation has no legal or academic value and, therefore, nor does the HEI’s awards.\(^\text{17}\)

A national system of program accreditation can address many of the issues raised above:

i. It establishes nation-wide program standards, while clearly identifying that responsibility for meeting these standards lies with the institution. This is important in ensuring that the Oman higher education sector contributes to the achievement of national priorities.

ii. It helps promote alignment between program licensing and program accreditation processes, by making these processes transparent.

iii. It enables national oversight of quality assurance and improvement systems in HEIs, ensuring that these are in place and effective, and that the outcomes of these systems meet national standards.


iv. It ensures consistency in program accreditation processes across Oman (in program standards, accreditation methodology; outcomes), so enabling meaningful comparison of programs.

v. It facilitates transparency in both the accreditation process and its outcomes, and enables stakeholders to reach informed views about HEIs and their programs, and to make informed decisions (see also Section 8, Public Reporting and Comparability).

As is emphasised below (see Section 5.13), non-Omani external program accreditation is not a substitute for a national system of program accreditation, and all programs (with the exception of General Foundation programs and health programs – see Sections 5.8) will be expected to undergo OAAA program accreditation.

In the Oman higher education sector, HEIs other than universities may secure external approval of their programs through a diploma/degree awarding affiliate HEI, or may deliver the affiliate HEI’s programs locally. In some cases, these are clearly-defined arrangements, whereby the affiliate is the validating body, and the award is in the affiliate HEIs name. In other cases, the affiliations and relationships are looser, and the partner’s role may be more advisory (see also Section 5.13 on overseas affiliate programs).

In all these cases, there are a number of important implications for program accreditation\textsuperscript{18}: It needs to be recognised that all programs, irrespective of the awarding HEI, are being delivered in an Omani context and that, therefore, the opportunities and challenges for the maintenance of standards and the quality of the student learning experience are specific to that context.

The development of a program by an affiliate HEI does not remove responsibility for quality from the local (Omani) HEI. All requirements of OAAA program accreditation must be met, regardless of the standing or reputation of the affiliate HEI. Adopting a program that has been accredited elsewhere does not remove any of those requirements.

3.4 The scope of Program Standards

Extensive international benchmarking has confirmed that program accreditation processes are characterised by a broad scope or coverage, rather than by a narrow range of investigation. For example, a study of some 11\textsuperscript{19} accrediting bodies reveals that their approach to program accreditation covers typically between eight to 11 broad areas of provision and practice, and that this is true for both ‘general’ and ‘professional’ accrediting bodies. Thus, in addition to examining ‘narrow’ definitions of the program (for example, aims and objectives; intended learning outcomes; curriculum design; teaching, learning and assessment), it is customary for

\textsuperscript{18} Guidance from the following is gratefully acknowledged: NCAAA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), Handbook for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Saudi Arabia: Part 2 Internal Quality Assurance Arrangements, (July 2011), Section 2.6, p49.

\textsuperscript{19} ABET; APA-CoA; ASIIN; CAA; EKKA ;EPAS; EQUIS; MQA; NBA; NCAAA; TEQSA
program accreditation to consider the program in a more holistic way (for example, including managerial and administrative support for the program; financial planning and management; student support services; facilities and other services; community engagement).

The benchmarking exercise also confirms that there is no significant area of program provision or practice, covered routinely by benchmarking bodies internationally, that the proposed OAAA program scope is neglecting.

Overall, the benchmarking exercise confirms that the proposed scope of the OAAA’s program accreditation process (covering some nine areas of provision and practice) is in keeping with international expectations and good practice in accreditation bodies.

3.5 Institutional Accreditation and Program Accreditation

Royal Decree Number 54/2010 requires that all HEIs undergo both institutional and program accreditation. The following section sets out the key differences, and the relationship between these processes.

While institutional accreditation and program accreditation both concern the establishment of the status or appropriateness of an institution or program, it is important to be clear about the difference between the two accreditation activities. The two activities each have a distinctive focus and both have an important role to play. While both processes cover the same broad scope (in this case, nine areas of activity), the two processes have a different perspective – with institutional accreditation taking a ‘global’ look at the HEI’s activities; and program accreditation considering provision from the ‘local’ perspective of the program.

In institutional accreditation, the unit of analysis is the institution as a whole. Therefore, the scope of institutional accreditation covers all aspects of the HEI: for example, academic and organisational structures; policies and procedures; educational provision; and staffing and services. The focus of Institutional Accreditation is the HEIs compliance with the standards across all areas of the institution. Overall, institutional accreditation confirms the legitimacy or good standing of an institution (for example, that it has met its obligations to have effective systems for quality assurance and improvement). Importantly, institutional accreditation does not make any judgments about specific programs of study.

In program accreditation, the unit of analysis is a program, or a cluster of cognate programs. The focus of program accreditation is the program’s compliance with generic program standards.

---

The following sources are gratefully acknowledged in this section:
Harvey, L., 2004–13, *Analytic Quality Glossary*, Quality Research International, [http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/](http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/) accessed 12/31/2013; Copyright Lee Harvey 2004-12; Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (USA); Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (USA); New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (USA); Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (USA); National Board of Accreditation (India).

and, overall, program accreditation confirms the academic standing of the program and the quality of learning opportunities and related services for students on that program. The program is the ‘lens’ through which students experience the HEI as a whole. It cannot be assumed that the HEI’s policies and procedures, priorities and strategies will be implemented across the HEI is exactly the same way in each and every school or department and in each and every program. Indeed, it is important that there is sufficient flexibility so that institutional policies can be applied in an appropriate way at the program level, while also maintaining a minimum quality. Therefore, it is important that program accreditation examines the wider environment in which the program operates, in addition to the academic standards of the program. In doing so the focus of program accreditation is on the quality of the student learning experience as a whole.

It is also important that the relationship between institutional accreditation and program accreditation is clearly understood. Institutional accreditation examines the systems for overseeing the quality of all programs, and this may involve the close examination of a sample of programs in order to evaluate the effectiveness of those institution-wide arrangements. Correspondingly, although program accreditation does not focus on institutional matters, all institutional arrangements impact upon the quality of the program and, therefore, the impact of these arrangements need to be assessed. For example, if institutional processes result in program staffing being inadequate, learning resources insufficient, or a serious lack of equipment or other resources, this may prevent the program being accredited.

Both institutional accreditation and program accreditation bring benefits to HEIs, both tangible and intangible: Public recognition that the HEI as a whole is in good standing and meeting international benchmarks of good practice; similarly, the good standing of individual programs can be publically recognized, allowing such programs to be rated on a national platform; and reassurance to employers that graduates will be equipped with sound knowledge and skills, from a reputable program and HEI. For the HEI, accreditation status represents an important confirmation of the quality and standards of the HEI and its programs, and is therefore also a powerful marketing tool in attracting and recruiting prospective students. (The benefits of program accreditation are discussed in more detail in Section 4).

4. What does it mean for programs in Oman to be accredited?

4.1. Key characteristics of accreditation

The key characteristics, and benefits, of accreditation are well-established and are identified by higher education accrediting bodies in their literature. These include: verification or approval of a program by an authorised external organisation; and formal recognition that a program meets minimum required standards and benchmark criteria.

---

22 The guidance and examples provided by the NCAAA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) is gratefully acknowledged: Handbook for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Saudi Arabia, Part 3, External Reviews for Accreditation and Quality Assurance, (July 2011), pp8-9
These characteristics are quite narrow in that they describe accreditation as a process whereby an external body makes use of external benchmarks or standards to give formal verification to a program. However, it is recognised\(^{23}\) that program accreditation also brings wider benefits, and these include:

- To confirm that qualifications are of a sound standard, and can be recognised and respected internationally, including in relation to academic discipline benchmarks and/or professional requirements; this benefit accords with the Royal Decree 54/2010 which calls on the OAAA to ensure that Omani higher education meets international standards, in doing so facilitating mutual recognition regionally and internationally.
- To support, advise and give feedback to institutions on the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of their programs.
- To promote quality improvement, at both institutional and program levels.
- To provide independent information, and assurance, to the public, government bodies and other stakeholders of the good standing of a program.
- To enable an institution to state publicly that its programs have undergone external verification and satisfied the requirements of that independent body.

4.2. Defining Program Standards

ROSQA does not include an explicit definition of program standards, although standards are expressed as ‘standards of good practice in higher education institutions, and suggested quality indicators and performance measures’. The Quality Plan\(^{24}\) (2006, p20) notes that ROSQA’s conception of provider standards are ‘...incomplete in that they are concerned with the achievement of minima rather than encouraging quality enhancement, and therefore need to be revised’. In addressing this, the OAAA has sought to incorporate into the program standards the consideration of an HEI’s capacity and intent for quality improvement (for example, the HEI’s use of the analytical tool ADRI; and how the HEI uses its quality assurance systems to identify areas for improvement, and implements and evaluates its quality improvement plans).

A number of accrediting bodies and quality agencies use the concepts of ‘minimum standards’, ‘threshold standards’ ‘benchmark standards’, ‘enhanced standards’ and ‘target standards’ in different ways and with different meanings. It is therefore important that the OAAA uses a clear definition of ‘standards’ in order to achieve clarity and transparency in its program accreditation process.

\(^{23}\) BAC; CAA; EKKA; MQA; NCAAA
The OAAA program standards are informed by ROSQA and reflect current international standards. These have been appropriately customised for Oman. The program standards will assist HEIs in maintaining their academic standards and reviewing and improving their quality at the program level. They will also encourage HEIs to recognise the importance of using data (quantitative and qualitative) to inform decision-making, planning, self-evaluation and improvement at the program level.

If a program meets the required (applicable) standards, it will be accredited. This accreditation means that the program meets minimum required standards which are consistent with internationally benchmarked standards, and that the quality and standards of the program are appropriate for the award to which the program leads. Importantly, a national system of program accreditation will provide confidence to current students, prospective students, employers, other stakeholders and the public at large of the good standing of Omani higher education programs. In doing so, program accreditation will support the OAAA’s mission to ‘provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman’.

5. Fundamental principles of Program Accreditation

The fundamental principles underpinning program standards and program accreditation include the following:

5.1. Responsibility for meeting program standards lies with the HEI. This principle was included in ROSQA and is also reinforced in the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice for External Quality Assurance Agencies25: ‘The EQAA recognizes that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves’. As indicated in ROSQA, an HEI is expected to effectively manage the quality of its programs, using benchmarks and internal and external reference points that it considers to be appropriate for its programs, its mission and circumstances26. The HEI must determine what it will submit in a program standards accreditation application in order to demonstrate how it meets the standards. Guidance for HEIs in preparing their program accreditation submission will be provided in the Program Standards Assessment Manual. The role of the OAAA is to ensure that quality assurance and improvement systems are in place and are effective, and that the outcomes of these systems meet the required standards.

5.2. The program standards are aligned with the institutional accreditation scope set out in the Quality Audit Manual27, which covers nine broad areas of HEI provision. Accordingly, there

26 Benchmarks and reference points may include, for example, Strategic Plan, Mission and Vision; Quality Audit report (internal reference points); and the Oman Qualifications Framework; Professional and Accrediting Bodies; comparable HEIs; subject benchmark statements (external reference points).
are nine program standards. Underpinning the nine program standards, there are 75 criteria aligned with the sections of the institutional accreditation scope, and each program standard has a number of criteria which will normally need to be satisfied in order to meet the standard. Within each criterion, there are a number of indicators which aim to provide guidance on how the criteria might normally be met. As the indicators have the status of guidance only, HEIs may wish to use different indicators to demonstrate how they are meeting the criteria (see Section 6).

5.3. Some of the program standards will not be applicable to all programs. This will depend on the specific nature of the program, and the Vision, Mission and institutional classification of the HEI. For example, colleges of higher education may consider that some of the criteria within the standard for staff research and consultancy may not apply to their programs. Similarly, some HEIs may have no institutional affiliations or associated entities, as described in the standard relating to governance and management. Where an HEI considers that any standards and criteria are not applicable to the program, the rationale for this will need to be set out clearly by the HEI in the program accreditation application.

5.4. The program standards presented are minimum standards. In order to encourage excellence, consideration was given to the use of ‘stretch’ standards. The benchmarking exercise confirmed that ‘stretch’ or ‘enhanced’ standards are used by some, but by no means all accrediting agencies. The OAAA does not intend to use ‘stretch’ standards per se as part of program accreditation; however, the program accreditation process will encourage and recognize excellence through the range of program assessment outcomes (see Section 7 ‘Outcomes of the Program Accreditation Process’).

5.5. The program standards are based on ROSQA and are internationally benchmarked and contextualised for the Omani HE sector. Where appropriate, new criteria and indicators underpinning the standards have been develop to ensure that any omissions identified through the mapping and benchmarking process have been addressed, and also to reflect internationally recognised good practice. The program standards also seek to respond to the outcomes of the Institutional Accreditation Stage 1 Quality Audit, in particular, the areas for improvement related to the program level, and OAAA has taken cognisance of these areas in drafting the revised standards.

5.6. The standards incorporate the requirement to address Omani national initiatives, protocols, guidelines and strategies; for example that all HEIs (and by extension, their programs) abide by national health and safety regulations, and the recommendation that all HEIs include human rights and entrepreneurship skills in their curricula.

5.7. The program standards are generic. The draft Quality Plan originally proposed a process based on narrow-field (subject-specific) program standards. The current benchmarking

---

28 Institutional classifications are set out in ROSQA, Chapter 1.
exercise has identified that, while some accreditation bodies and quality assurance agencies have developed subject-specific guidance, many other accrediting bodies have chosen to develop generic program standards, and some professional accreditation bodies have developed both generic and professional standards.\textsuperscript{29} The OAAA proposes the development of generic program standards as the way forward, recognising the following: the outcomes of its benchmarking exercise; the role of professional accrediting bodies in the Omani HE sector; HEIs’ ultimate responsibility for the academic standards and quality of their programs and awards; and pragmatic considerations such as time, cost and the frequency with which any narrow field standards will need updating (for example, in areas such as Information Technology). The use of generic program standards enables the nation-wide application of these standards. The generic standards also enable HEIs to identify and implement benchmark discipline-specific and/or professional requirements, appropriate for their institutional vision, mission and context. Program Standards Assessment will evaluate how appropriately and effectively the HEI has used these external reference points in its program design and development. Accordingly, therefore, HEIs will have responsibility, through their program approval process, for the development of appropriately benchmarked narrow-field (subject-specific) academic standards; this in turn will support the development, independence and diversity of HEIs.

5.8. General Foundation programs will not undergo program accreditation in the near future; instead, General Foundation programs will be subject to a separate audit process, which will include consideration of an HEI’s performance against the Oman Academic Standards or General Foundation Programs\textsuperscript{30} (approved in 2008) as well as other standards/criteria. It is anticipated that the first round of quality audits for Foundation programs will begin in 2015. For the accreditation of medical programs, it has been agreed that the OAAA works in collaboration with recognised international accreditation agencies.

5.9. Accreditation decisions will relate to the specified program(s) identified in the application submitted by an HEI. It is therefore important to clarify what is meant by a program in contrast to, for example, a cluster of provision related to a particular academic discipline or professional field of study. ROSQA defines a program as ‘…a coherent course of study followed by students…leading to an academic award or a professional qualification’. Similar definitions are provided by other quality agencies and accrediting bodies, highlighting key features of a program in that it must: include an approved and integrated package of

\textsuperscript{29} For example, the QAA (UK) has well-established subject benchmark statements, covering an extensive range of subject areas at both Honours and Masters levels (currently under review), which set out expectations about standards in a range of subject areas. These are used by UK HEIs in their internal quality assurance processes for program development, approval, review and re-approval. Other quality assurance bodies, such as CAA (United Arab Emirates); NCAAA (Saudi Arabia), NBA (India), TEQSA (Australia) and MQA (Malaysia) have adopted generic program standards. ABET, ASIIN and APA-CoA have developed both generic and professional standards.

\textsuperscript{30} \texttt{http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/GFP%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf}
courses/modules and activities; deliver a coherent learning experience for students; and lead to a qualification \(^{31}\).

5.10. The unit of analysis is the program. The OAAA anticipates that HEIs will need guidance on their applications on whether to submit for accreditation individual programs or a portfolio of programs, related by narrow field or department. The OAAA is in the process of preparing guidance on this for HEIs, including the following preliminary advice \(^{32}\):

i. A title of an award is not necessarily a useful guide to what should be regarded as a program; for example, general award titles such as Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, or Bachelor of Business may include a number of different courses of study and learning experiences of students.

ii. A cluster of related programs in the same subject field (for example, undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs) may be considered together, but the self-assessment submitted must deal separately with each program; importantly, the outcomes of the Standards Assessment may be different for different programs.

iii. A program offered on different campuses will be considered to be a single program, and should be evaluated as such; the application will need to identify and evaluate differences in how the program is delivered across these different locations.

iv. A program offered through different modes of delivery (for example, on-campus; distance education, on-line) will be considered to be a single program; the application will need to identify and evaluate these different modes of study.

v. Assessment of a program will include all the courses/modules a student is required to study, including where these are offered by another department within the HEI and/or by another HEI.

5.11. The program accreditation process will align with other OAAA processes (specifically the institutional accreditation process) and the Ministry of Higher Education or other supervising ministries’ processes (program licensing).

5.12. There are a small number of pre-requisites relating to an HEI’s application for program accreditation. It is a prerequisite that HEIs have undergone Institutional Accreditation (Stage 1 Quality Audit) before applying for program accreditation. Additionally, before applying for program accreditation, it is a requirement that at least one cohort of students has graduated from the program at the final target level. Institutional Accreditation (Stage 2) is not a pre-requisite of program accreditation, and the two processes are separate. In the case of small, specialist, HEIs, with only one or two programs, a case may be made for

\(^{31}\) For example, NCAAA; QAA

\(^{32}\) Based on the NCAAA (2009), Standards for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education Programs, ‘Notes on what constitutes a program’ pp3-4.
joint institutional and program accreditation. Within these parameters, the national schedule for program accreditation will be negotiated with the sector.

5.13. All academic programs being offered at HEIs in Oman will undertake the national accreditation process. The program accreditation process will include affiliate programs that already have accreditation and/or have undergone validation or approval by an overseas HEI (see also, Section 3.3). Affiliate (or ‘foreign’) programs are described in ROSQA as those where an HEI in Oman offers programs in partnership with an overseas university and the awards conferred are those of the overseas university\(^{33}\). The draft Quality Plan noted that ROSQA recognised the role of foreign programs in the Omani HE sector, though it did not differentiate in its accreditation methods between foreign and domestic programs. The Quality Plan proposed a national program accreditation system which would include the recognition of foreign programs through a process which considered foreign quality assurance arrangements\(^{34}\). The spirit of the Quality Plan’s intention is reflected in the Royal Decree 54/2010. The outcomes of a cycle of Quality Audit suggest that the Oman HE sector would benefit from a comprehensive implementation of the program accreditation process for all programs, whether offered by an Omani HEI or overseas HEI\(^{35}\). Accordingly, all academic programs being offered at HEIs in Oman will need to undergo the national accreditation process. However, the evidence of existing program accreditation or validation will be considered within the program Standards Assessment. In this way, the process for recognition is subsumed within the program accreditation process.

5.14. The program Standards Assessment process endeavours to be as simple as it can be to meet its aims. This will support a realistic timeframe for HEIs seeking program accreditation, and the need for the process to be manageable and efficient.

5.15. The program Standards Assessment process is based on self-assessment followed by external review, undertaken by peers. A key element of the program accreditation application is the program accreditation application, the product of the HEI conducting an effective and evidence-based self-assessment of its program provision and quality assurance arrangements, against the standards; the self-assessment will be supported by submission of documentation. Other key elements of the accreditation process are the use of a panel of peer reviewers to undertake the evaluation of the program, and a visit to the HEI to meet with students and staff and to consider further evidence and documentation. The Standards Assessment Panel will comprise up to five external reviewers (panel members), drawn from the OAAA’s register of external reviewers, and will include experts in the relevant discipline(s) and/or professions. The OAAA’s Register includes eminent

---


people from Oman and overseas who have demonstrated leadership in their disciplines, higher education management, or professions and industries that engage with HEIs.

5.16. The program Standards Assessment process seeks to ensure that HEIs and their programs are not overly burdened by the quantity and complexity of evidence to be submitted in order to demonstrate that a standard has been met. The OAAA will provide guidance on the nature of evidence that an HEI might submit to support its claim that a standard has been met. The program assessment will not seek to be prescriptive and will not require programs to submit a specified set of documentation, beyond the program accreditation application and a set of key contextual documentation. The OAAA is committed to containing the administrative burden placed on programs (and HEIs); therefore, programs are encouraged to submit pre-existing evidence, including data provided for other government agencies data used for institutional accreditation; and documentation that is routinely produced for the program’s and HEI’s quality assurance and improvement processes.

5.17. Transparency is central to the program Standards Assessment process. The granting of program accreditation will have a major impact for all stakeholders. Therefore, it is very important that the outcome of the process is clear, and that the way in which the outcome has been arrived at is transparent, based on an explicit published approach that is applied consistently. The Program Accreditation Manual will provide advice on how the program standards will be assessed and will encourage HEIs to use the ADRI approach when preparing their Self Assessment. HEIs will be expected to provide evidence to show the effectiveness of their quality assurance and improvement arrangements in order to meet the program standards in all nine areas, where applicable.

36 See, for example, ENQA (2009), European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education; 2.3 Criteria for decisions.
6. Organisation of the Program Standards

Careful consideration has been given to how the standards can best be presented to ensure clarity, and understanding by the sector. It is proposed that there are three distinct levels: standard; criterion; and indicator. This organisational structure, which is consistent with that used for Institutional Standards\(^37\), is shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td><strong>2. Student Learning by Coursework</strong></td>
<td>These standards cover the nine areas of the institutional accreditation scope as outlined in the Quality Audit Manual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Programs delivered through student learning by coursework are defined by well-grounded student learning outcomes, curricula and teaching, learning and assessment approaches, so as to achieve clearly defined graduate attributes and positive graduate destinations and employability</td>
<td>An overarching statement which sets out the requirements of the standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion</td>
<td><strong>Criterion 2.1 Graduate Attributes and Student Learning Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>There will be 75 criteria in line with the institutional accreditation scope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion</td>
<td>The program has appropriate and clearly defined student learning outcomes and graduate attributes that students will be able to achieve and demonstrate on the completion of their program</td>
<td>A statement of one of the criteria which would normally have to be achieved to meet the standard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>Indicators</strong></td>
<td>Statements of guidance on how the criteria might normally be met. HEIs may chose to use additional and/or alternative indicators to demonstrate how they meet the criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>a)</strong> There are definitive learning outcomes which are clearly expressed and communicated to staff and students, so that both academic staff and learners know what is expected of them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>b)</strong> Program learning outcomes incorporate effectively the institution’s student graduate attributes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>c)</strong> Learning outcomes take full consideration of the academic standards and general expectations in the relevant academic field(s) of study and reflect fully the expectations of the Oman Qualifications Framework for standards of achievement in student outcomes, including: conceptual skills, relevant knowledge, and the ability to apply what is learned [based on ROSQA, attachment 1, p56].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>d)</strong> Where applicable, learning outcomes should meet the relevant professional requirements for employment in Oman and abroad [based on ROSQA, attachment 1, p56].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>e)</strong> For articulated qualifications and defined exit awards within the program (for example, a Diploma or Advanced Diploma within a Bachelor’s qualification), there are clearly defined learning outcomes for each award.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td><strong>f)</strong> There are appropriate teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable students to demonstrate their development of the graduate attributes and achievement of the learning outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^37\) [http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_Assessment_New](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_Assessment_New) Note all standards are in draft format and currently undergoing review based on sector and stakeholder feedback.
7. Outcomes of the Program Accreditation process

7.1. Rating against the Criteria

As set out in Section 6, each of the nine standards consists of an overarching standard statement and a set of related criteria. Indicators describe the type of qualities a program needs to demonstrate to show that it meets the criteria. In doing so, indicators provide guidance to an HEI on how it might demonstrate that the program meets the criteria. The HEI may also decide to use other indicators to show how the program meets the criteria; it is not necessary for the program to meet every indicator.

All nine standards (where applicable) have to be met for a program to be accredited (see Section 5.3 for discussion on non-applicable standards or criteria). In order to meet a standard, it is expected that all related criteria will normally be met. This means that the Standards Assessment Panel will use their professional judgement, based on consideration of the evidence made available to them, to decide whether or not a criterion has been met. The Panel will also apply its professional judgement about whether or not some criteria are applicable, or in instances where an HEI is unable to meet one or more of the criteria due to exceptional circumstances. Table 7.1 sets out the rating scale to be used in evaluating performance against the criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Score</th>
<th>Criterion Rating</th>
<th>Definition and Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 4            | Excellent        | **Definition:** Provision or practice is consistently very high quality, and is underpinned by effective quality improvement arrangements. **Characteristics:**
|              |                  | i. Provision or practice exceeds the requirements of the criteria.  
|              |                  | ii. Provision or practice is highly effective, and is undertaken consistently; it may be a model of good practice  
|              |                  | iii. Provision or practice is exceptional rather than typical of other comparable programs  
|              |                  | iv. Provision or practice incorporates systematic and effective quality improvement arrangements. |
| 3            | Good             | **Definition:** Provision or practice is consistently high quality in most areas and is underpinned by effective quality improvement arrangements. **Characteristics:**
|              |                  | i. Overall, provision or practice exceeds the requirements of the criteria.  
|              |                  | ii. Overall, provision or practice is high quality; is undertaken consistently; and meets the norms for |
### Table 7.1 Rating against the Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2 Satisfactory | Provision or practice is effective most of the time, and is underpinned by adequate quality improvement arrangements. | i. Provision or practice meets the requirements of the criteria, and is effective most of the time.  
ii. Provision or practice is underpinned by adequate quality improvement arrangements, which are effective most of the time. |
| 1 Not met      | Provision or practice does not meet the requirements of the criteria.     | i. Provision or practice does not meet the requirements of the criteria.  
ii. Provision or practice lacks effective quality improvement arrangements |
| NA Not applicable | An HEI will be expected to justify why the criterion is not applicable to the program. |                                                            |

#### 7.2 Rating against the Standards

Table 7.2 (a) sets out how the nine standards will be rated, based on a program’s performance against the corresponding criteria. Table 7.2 (b) sets out how, in turn, the standards ratings inform the final assessment outcomes.

The program Standards Assessment concludes with a judgement of whether the standards have been met or not met. Programs that have been deemed to satisfactorily meet all the (applicable) standards will be ‘Accredited’, and a Program Accreditation Certificate will be awarded. Programs which demonstrate excellent provision or practice in the majority of standards will be acknowledged as ‘Accredited with Merit’. It will also be possible for programs demonstrating excellent provision in specific standards to be acknowledged as ‘Accredited with Merit’ in those named standards.
### Standard Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Most(^{38}) of the criteria are rated as ‘Excellent’; no criteria are rated as ‘Not Met’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Most(^{39}) of the criteria are rated as ‘Good’; no criteria are rated as ‘Not Met’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>Most(^{40}) criteria are rated as ‘Satisfactory’; no criteria are rated as ‘Not Met’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>One or more criteria are rated as ‘Not Met’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>An HEI will be expected to justify why the standard is not applicable to the provision; otherwise, the standard will be rated as ‘Not Met’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 7.2(a) Standards Ratings

### Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Assessment Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most(^{41}) of the standards are rated ‘Excellent’ and all other standards are rated, as a minimum, ‘Satisfactory’</td>
<td>Accredited with Merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All standards are rated, as a minimum, ‘Satisfactory’, and one or more standards are rated as ‘Excellent’</td>
<td>Accredited with Merit in one or more standard(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All standards are rated either ‘Satisfactory’ or ‘Good’</td>
<td>Accredited(^{42})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more of the standards are rated as ‘Not Met’</td>
<td>On Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more of the standards ‘Not Met’ as evaluated by the Standards Reassessment Panel</td>
<td>Not accredited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 7.2(b) How Standards Ratings inform the Assessment Outcomes

---

\(^{38}\) For ‘most’ criteria to be rated ‘Excellent’, more than 50% of criteria need to be rated ‘Excellent’ and no criteria rated ‘Not Met’.

\(^{39}\) For ‘most’ criteria to be rated as ‘Good’, more than 50% of criteria need to be rated ‘Good’ and no criteria rated ‘Not Met’.

\(^{40}\) For most criteria to be rated as ‘Satisfactory, more than 50% of the criteria need to be rated ‘Satisfactory’ and no criteria rated ‘Not Met’, Some of the criteria may be rated as ‘Good’.

\(^{41}\) For ‘most’ standards to be rated ‘Excellent’, more than 50% of standards need to be rated ‘Excellent’, with no standards ‘Not Met’.

\(^{42}\) Please note that a ‘Good’ rating does not translate directly to a corresponding final accreditation outcome. However, ‘Good’ ratings will be recognized through the OAAA’s approach to public reporting (see ‘Section 8 Public Reporting and Comparability’ of the CDF).
7.3 Standards Assessment outcomes

The proposed outcomes of the program accreditation are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accreditation Outcomes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accredited with Merit</td>
<td>The program exceeds the requirements of the national program standards. The program is rated as ‘Excellent’ in most of the standards, and is underpinned by highly effective quality improvement arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accredited with Merit in one or more Standard(s)</td>
<td>The program meets or exceeds the requirements of the national program standards; is rated as ‘Excellent’ in one or more standards; and is underpinned by effective quality improvement arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accredited</td>
<td>The program meets the requirements of the national program standards, and is effective most of the time. In some standards, provision or practice may exceed the requirements of the standards. There are adequate quality improvement arrangements, which are effective most of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On probation</td>
<td>The program does not meet the requirements of the national program standards. The program will be placed on probation and undergo Program Standards Reassessment in 1-2 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Accredited</td>
<td>Having undergone Program Standards Reassessment, the program continues to not meet the requirements of the national program standards, and/or fails to demonstrate sufficient progress against these standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Deferred</strong></td>
<td>Where action(s) by the HEI is required to meet a standard (s), and where the Standards Assessment Panel determines that the HEI can implement the action(s) is a short time period (up to three months), the OAAA may grant the HEI a period of time to demonstrate that it has addressed these outstanding issues, and that it meets the standard. An accreditation outcome decision will not be made public during this time, and this stage will be considered part of the accreditation process. Once the OAAA is satisfied that the standard(s) has been fully met, the program will be accredited, and the outcome made public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.3 Outcomes of Program Accreditation*
7.4 Probation

Where standards have not been met, the program will be placed on one-to-two year Probation and be given the opportunity to address the identified issues. Upon Reassessment, if standards have again not been met, and insufficient progress has been shown, then the program will not be accredited. The OAAA will inform the relevant supervising ministry which will respond to the accreditation decision in line with its own policies.

Consideration is yet to be given to the Program Standards Reassessment process post-probation, and to the process by which accreditation might be revoked in response to very significant changes in the program’s circumstances.

7.5 Appeals process

In line with international good practice, HEIs who are not satisfied with the OAAA’s decision, or consider that they have not been fairly dealt with by the process will have the right to appeal\textsuperscript{43}.

8. Public Reporting and Comparability

A Program Accreditation Report, communicating the accreditation outcome and the evidence on which this is based, will be provided to the HEI in question, and the accreditation outcomes will be published on the OAAA website, alongside the publication of ratings for each standard and for the associated criteria.

The OAAA wishes to develop a transparent and effective means for stakeholders to identify how an HEI and its programs have performed in Standards Assessment. Part of the rationale for a four-point rating scale (see above Sections 7.1 and 7.2) is that this provides clear information to meet that need.

As the number of HEIs submitting their programs for accreditation increases, stakeholders such as current and prospective students, employers, and the supervising ministries will be able to use this data in order to distinguish between HEIs and similar programs operating in different HEIs, and to compare their performance. The OAAA’s intention is not to produce a ranking system, but to facilitate students and other stakeholders who wish to search for focused information in relation to their specific needs.

The proposed approach to the reporting of program Standards Assessment will also enable HEIs to develop their profile, supported by independent information from OAAA, on the quality of their programs and the wider student experience on those programs. It also enables students and other stakeholders to rank institutions based on their own choice of weighting scheme for the 75 criteria.

\textsuperscript{43} The OAAA Appeals Manual can be found at: http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Docs/appeals_manual_e_2009.pdf
## Appendix A Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQA</td>
<td>Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities <a href="http://www.aqa.ac.nz">http://www.aqa.ac.nz</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPA</td>
<td>Association of Specialized and professional Accreditors <a href="http://www.aspa-usa.org/">http://www.aspa-usa.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAC</td>
<td>British Accreditation Council, United Kingdom <a href="http://www.the-bac.org/">http://www.the-bac.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAA</td>
<td>Commission for Academic Accreditation, UAE <a href="https://www.caa.ae/caa/DesktopDefault.aspx">https://www.caa.ae/caa/DesktopDefault.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDF</td>
<td>Conceptual Design Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFMD</td>
<td>European Foundation for Management Development, Brussels. <a href="https://www.efmd.org/">https://www.efmd.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQAA</td>
<td>External Quality Assurance Agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EKKA</td>
<td>Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (Eesti Kõrghariduse Kavaltiediagentuur) <a href="http://ekka.archimedes.ee/">http://ekka.archimedes.ee/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INQAAHE</td>
<td>International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MQA</td>
<td>Malaysian Qualification Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSCHE</td>
<td>Middle States Commission on Higher Education, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASPAA</td>
<td>Netwrok of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>National Board of Accreditation, India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QAA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QAM</td>
<td>Quality Audit Manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCUK</td>
<td>Research Councils UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROSQA</td>
<td>Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECHEI</td>
<td>Supreme Education Council - Higher Education Institute, Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEQSA</td>
<td>Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UUK</td>
<td>Universities United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASC</td>
<td>Western Association of Schools and Colleges, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>