

OAC Policy on HEI Provision of Information and Access to People

v1

Preamble

The Oman Accreditation Council's quality assurance processes are designed on the internationally-accepted premise that "institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves" and that, therefore, "typically, an [external quality assurance agency's] review process includes a self-evaluation through self-study by the institution or program, external peer review, and a follow-up procedure" (INQAAHE, 2007, pp7&8).

In order to ensure that the OAC has access to all the information it requires to fulfill its quality assurance responsibilities, Article 6 of Royal Decree 74/2001, under which the OAC was established, states that: "the higher education institutions and other related parties shall provide the Board with data, statistics and information it requires and deems imperative for the accomplishment of its tasks." It is expected that HEIs will comply with this decree.

There may be many reasons why an HEI might not comply. These may include, for example: inadequate preparation; fear of a critical report; concerns about confidentiality; or a philosophical refusal to be held publicly accountable. Regardless of the reason, the effect would be that society (including students, prospective students, their families, funders, prospective staff, international affiliates etc.) would be deprived of access to independent verification of the quality of the HEI and/or its programs. Also, the HEI itself would miss an opportunity to receive valuable feedback that it can use for quality improvement purposes or – in the event of commendations – for celebratory purposes.

In the event that an HEI chooses to not submit a self-evaluation document (such as a Quality Audit Portfolio for quality audits), then it becomes almost impossible for the OAC to conduct an effective or appropriate quality assurance review of the HEI or its programs. Such non-submission may even be an indication that the HEI is unwilling to cooperate with the country's quality assurance processes as mandated by Royal Decree.

A second issue to consider is the timeliness of submissions made by HEIs. The OAC's national schedule of quality assurance processes involves many external reviewers, staff time and other workload management issues (such as national and international travel arrangements). Unscheduled delays in submitting the self-evaluation documents (in particular) and other supporting materials may seriously jeopardize the effective accomplishment of the quality assurance process in question, as well as the entire national schedule.

In determining the appropriate consequences of non-submission (or unacceptably late submission) of the self-evaluation documents by HEIs, the OAC has taken into consideration that such HEIs ought not face consequences which are more favourable to them than the consequences for those HEIs which do participate but find themselves placed on probation as a result of the OAC's findings.

Therefore, in the absence of a self-evaluation document the OAC may choose to not proceed with a regular quality assurance process and to reschedule it at its discretion. That said, the OAC reserves the right to proceed with the quality assurance process should the situation require a quality assurance process irrespective of the level of participation by the HEI (for example, in the event of a serious problem or when the institution or program is already on probation).

The OAC also reserves the right to establish disincentives for non-submission or late submission of supporting materials or for the non-availability of people with whom it needs to meet. These disincentives may include making public commentary on the matter and even cancellation and rescheduling of the quality assurance process.

In recognition of the sensitivity of some of the information involved in a quality assurance process, the OAC's review panels are instructed to negotiate with the HEIs appropriate means by which the information may be accessed while at the same time ensuring that confidentiality is appropriately respected (see, for example, the OAC's *Quality Audit Manual* p.45).

Policy

Higher Education Institutions are expected to cooperate fully with the quality assurance processes of the Oman Accreditation Council. HEIs are expected to provide the OAC (and its review panels) with the appropriate self-evaluation documents, and all the other information the OAC requires (including access to people for the purpose of interviews) in a complete and timely fashion in order for the OAC to effectively fulfill its responsibilities as set out by its Royal Decree. In the event of non-compliance by an HEI, the OAC reserves the right to impose sanctions including, but not limited to, public commentary, recommendations to the HEI's supervising Minister, and cancellation and rescheduling of the quality assurance process at the OAC's sole discretion.

Procedures in respect of non-submission or late submission of self-study documentation

1. If the primary submission (the self-study document) for a quality assurance process is received after the specified date specified by the OAC but not more than two weeks later, then the OAC shall note in its public report that the HEI submission was late and any consequential effect this may have had on the quality assurance process.
2. If the primary submission (the self-study document) for a quality assurance process is not received within two weeks of the specified date then the OAC reserves the right to not accept it and to cancel the quality assurance process.
3. In the event that the quality assurance process is cancelled due to #2 above, then the OAC shall reschedule the process for a date of its choosing (depending upon the OAC's workload availability and other factors at its sole discretion).
4. In the event that the quality assurance process is cancelled due to #2 above, then the OAC shall issue a public notice. While the public notice shall vary in each case depending upon the circumstances, the general message shall be as follows:

“[NAME OF HEI] was scheduled for [TYPE OF QA PROCESS] by the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) on [DATE]. A vital part of the quality assurance process is the undertaking of an evaluative self study by the institution, resulting in a written submission to the OAC. Unfortunately, [HEI] did not submit its self study by the required date, for reasons that the OAC considers unsatisfactory. As a consequence, the OAC has deemed it necessary to cancel the [TYPE OF QA PROCESS] and regrets to advise that it is unable to provide independent comment to the public about the quality of [HEI]'s activities at this time. The [TYPE OF QA PROCESS] has been rescheduled for [NEW DATE] and it is expected that [NAME OF HEI] will cooperate fully with this new time frame.”

5. If the primary submission (the self-study document) for a quality assurance process is not received within two weeks of the specified date, and the HEI or program is on probation or has already been rescheduled due to a previous cancellation due to #2 above, then the OAC reserves the right to proceed with the quality assurance process in the absence of the documentation. It may also reserve the right to make recommendations to the HEI's supervising Minister and to the Minister of Higher Education to take appropriate actions in respect of the management of the HEI and/or its institutional and/or program licenses.

Procedures in respect of non-submission, incomplete or late submission of supporting information

6. During a quality assurance process, the OAC (through its review panel) will ask the HEI for a number of items of supporting information in order to assist with its deliberations.
7. In the event that the HEI either does not submit the information or does not submit it in a complete or timely fashion, and the OAC has reasonable grounds to believe that the information does exist, then the OAC may make comment in its report/s and/or in the media as appropriate about the lack of cooperation and any consequential effect this may have had on the quality assurance process.

Procedures in respect of non-availability of people

8. During a quality assurance process, the OAC will ask the HEI for the review panel to meet with a number of people who will be able to assist the Panel with its deliberations.
9. The OAC understands that it will sometimes be impossible for a person to be available to the Panel at the required time for logistical reasons. However, it is expected that the HEI will treat the quality assurance process as a top priority and will make every effort to be as accommodating of the review panel's requests as possible.
10. In the event that the OAC has reasonable grounds to believe that the HEI has been less than fully cooperative in making people available, then the OAC may make comment in its report/s and/or in the media as appropriate about the lack of cooperation and any consequential effect this may have had on the quality assurance process.

General procedures

11. The OAC recognises that quality assurance processes can be complex, and seeks to work in cooperation with HEIs to achieve the most efficient and effective process possible.
12. Therefore, for each quality assurance process the Executive Officer of the OAC's review panel and the HEI's nominated contact person should maintain close communication and seek to resolve any difficulties in respect of provision of information as soon and as constructively as possible.
13. An HEI may lodge an Appeal against a Report from, and/or against a Decision by, the OAC Board in relation to a finding under the provisions of this policy. For further information see the *OAC Appeals Manual*.

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References

International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (2007). *Guidelines of Good Practice*. Retrieved 2 January, 2009, from <http://www.inqaahe.org/>.

Royal Decree 74/2001 *Establishing the Accreditation Board*. Sultanate of Oman.

Oman Accreditation Council (2008), *Quality Audit Manual – Institutional Accreditation: Stage 1*. Sultanate of Oman.