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Navigating Academic Accreditation in the Arab Gulf: A Case Study From Oman

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Case Report

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Abstract

Higher education in the Arab Gulf is experiencing a paradigm shift, driven by the rising demand for international academic standards and increased institutional accountability. This research focuses on Oman as a representative case and explores the country's evolving approach to academic accreditation under the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA). This study investigates the challenges faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) in meeting accreditation requirements, the quality assurance (QA) instruments used, and the role of digital transformation in supporting this journey.

Drawing on evidence from recent studies, including a national evaluation of QA tools in Omani HEIs, a thesis analysing institutional obstacles within some HEIes, and an analysis of digitalization trends in academic processes, this paper highlights how Oman's academic accreditation landscape is shaped by organizational readiness, staff engagement, and strategic use of technology.

The findings suggest that while significant progress has been made, barriers such as limited data utilization, fragmented QA processes, and a lack of centralized institutional structures continue to hinder full compliance with accreditation standards. Nevertheless, Oman’s increasing investment in digital infrastructure and policy reform provides a promising pathway toward achieving sustainable academic accreditation outcomes.

This paper contributes to the broader understanding of academic accreditation systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and offers practical recommendations for HEIs seeking to align with global best practices while addressing regional constraints.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education in the Arab Gulf region has witnessed rapid expansion and diversification. Driven by global competitiveness, economic diversification agendas, and rising student populations, countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have recognized the need to align their higher education institutions (HEIs) with international academic standards. As a result, accreditation has become a central pillar in the region’s educational reform agenda, serving as both a benchmark of quality and a mechanism for accountability.

Oman stands as a significant case within this transformation. With the establishment of the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA), the Sultanate formalized a national framework for quality assurance and institutional accreditation. The OAQA’s revised approach, which now begins with the implementation of quality improvement initiatives followed by the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA), reflects Oman’s commitment to continuous improvement and global relevance in its educational offerings OAQA [OAQA], n.d.). Figure 1 illustrates the institutional accreditation process within the OAQA framework in Oman. [OAQA], n.d.).

However, the accreditation process is not without challenges. Many HEIs, particularly those operated under government ministries, face structural, organizational, and resource-related obstacles in aligning with the standards set by the OAQA.

Previous studies (e.g., Al-Amri et al., 2021) have documented the widespread use of quality assurance tools such as questionnaires, feedback systems, and internal review mechanisms in Omani HEIs. However, these tools often suffer from fragmented implementation and limited integration into institutional decision-making. Furthermore, as highlighted in a detailed thesis by Saud Almuqarshi (2017), institutions under ministry oversight frequently encounter internal barriers—ranging from insufficient training to a lack of centralized oversight—that complicate the accreditation process.

Adding to this complexity is the accelerating influence of digital transformation. As emphasized by Subramanian et al. (2021), the shift toward digital platforms, learning analytics, and data-driven decision-making presents both opportunities and pressures for HEIs. In Oman, increasing investment in educational technologies and the government's commitment to digitization signal a progressive step toward overcoming traditional challenges in quality assurance.

This paper uses Oman's experience to explore how accreditation is navigated in the Arab Gulf, drawing on qualitative and empirical evidence to examine institutional readiness, quality practices, and technological advancements. Through this lens, it aims to provide strategic insights for HEIs seeking accreditation in the region and contributes to the broader discourse on quality assurance in GCC higher education systems.

A Comparative Analysis of Quality Assurance Systems in Gulf Higher Education

Table 1. *Quality Assurance Structures in GCC Countries*

Country	QA Authority	Key Instruments Used	Current Focus Area
Oman	Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA).	Institutional Audit, ISA, GA tracking, ISA Panel Evaluation	**Evidence-Based Improvement** **National Qualifications Framework** Digital transformation
UAE	Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA)	Standards for Licensure & Accreditation External reviews, Self-study, ISA Panel Evaluation	Internationalization & global benchmarking Quality enhancement over compliance
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	NCAAA	Self-evaluation reports (SER) KPI monitoring, Learning outcomes, External reviews Annual program reporting & quality assurance cycles	Graduate employability National Qualifications Framework Alignment with Vision 2030

Note. Adapted from OAQA (n.d.), CAA (n.d.), and NCAAA (n.d).

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of quality assurance (QA) systems across Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, highlighting both convergence and contextual variation in their approaches. Across the three countries, QA frameworks are underpinned by common instruments, including standards-based accreditation systems, external review mechanisms, and the increasing use of performance indicators such as key performance indicators, graduate tracking, and learning outcomes assessment. Additionally, all the systems align with national qualifications frameworks, reinforcing comparability and coherence both within and across higher education systems. In terms of focus areas, the table reveals a shared strategic shift toward evidence-based and outcome-driven quality assurance, with particular emphasis on graduate employability, alignment with labor market needs, and continuous quality improvement beyond compliance. Furthermore, internationalization and global benchmarking—especially prominent in the UAE—alongside digital transformation initiatives, as seen in Oman, reflect a broader regional orientation toward global competitiveness. Collectively, these patterns indicate a clear transition from traditional audit-based models to more integrated, performance-oriented QA systems consistent with international best practices in higher education quality assurance (OAAQA, n.d.; CAA, n.d.; NCAAA, n.d.).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. **Title: Evaluation of Quality Assurance Instruments in Higher Education Institutions: A Case of Oman (**Al-Amri, A.S., Zubairi, Y.Z., Jani, R., Naqvi, S., 2021)

This study investigates the quality assurance (QA) tools employed by Omani higher education institutions (HEIs) to align with the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA) standards. Through interviews with quality assurance managers from five HEIs, the research reveals that institutions predominantly utilize surveys, internal meetings, and summary statistics for quality monitoring. However, the effective use of these data in decision-making processes is limited. The study highlights a significant challenge: staff often perceive QA data collection as a procedural requirement rather than a strategic tool for institutional improvement.

2. **Title: Towards Quality Higher Education in Oman: Implementing Quality Assurance in the Colleges of Technology (**Lontok, R., Al-Ghassani, A., Al-Saidi, O., 2023)

This paper examines the implementation of quality assurance frameworks across Oman's Colleges of Technology. It provides a historical overview of QA efforts, particularly the alignment with national frameworks such as the Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA). The study notes the development of internal QA units and self-assessment cycles as significant milestones. However, operational challenges such as a lack of staff training, ineffective internal audit capacity, and limited autonomy in decision-making were identified as obstacles. The authors recommend greater decentralization and professional development to enhance QA outcomes in ministry-run institutions.

3. **Title: Obstacles in Achieving Academic Accreditation within an Omani Government Ministry (**Almuqarshi, S., 2017 (MSc Dissertation))

This dissertation explores the institutional challenges faced by HEIs under a specific Omani government ministry in achieving academic accreditation. It identifies organizational, educational, and human obstacles as major barriers. Through structured surveys and statistical analysis of faculty and administrative staff responses, the study reveals that most obstacles stem from rigid hierarchies, unclear QA objectives, insufficient training, and a lack of ownership among stakeholders. The author suggested that establishing a central QA body within the organization could improve consistency and drive quality improvements across institutions.

4. **Title: Digital Transformation in Omani Higher Education: Assessing Student Adoption of Video Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic (**Almahri, F.A.J., Salem, I.E., Elbaz, A.M., Aideed, H., Gulzar, Z., 2024)

This study assesses the adoption of video communication tools among students in Omani higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the broader digital transformation in the sector. The research indicates a significant increase in the use of digital platforms for learning, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. While students appreciated the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, issues such as digital literacy, infrastructure limitations, and engagement levels were noted.

This study underscores the need for strategic planning and investment in digital infrastructure to support sustainable digital transformation in higher education.

5. **Title: A Review of Graduate Attributes in** Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA). **Quality Audit Reports (OAQAE) (**Al-Saadi, Z.T., 2023)

In this paper, the emphasis on graduate attributes (GAs) in the quality audit reports of the Oman Authority for Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA) is analysed. By reviewing 12 audit reports, the study identifies key areas of interest and their importance in ensuring quality in college-preparedness programs. These findings suggest that while HEIs are required to document how their programs contribute to GA development, more systematic evaluation mechanisms are needed. The study recommends aligning student learning objectives with GA development and increasing stakeholder awareness to effectively implement GAs in higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the processes, challenges, and enablers of academic accreditation within Omani higher education institutions (HEIs). The qualitative method is suited to capturing rich, contextual insights into institutional experiences and perceptions related to accreditation under the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA).

Case Study Design

A single case study design was chosen, with a focus on Oman as a representative example of an Arab Gulf country navigating evolving accreditation frameworks. This design enables an in-depth examination of the institutional, organizational, and technological factors shaping accreditation outcomes within the national context.

Data Sources and Collection

Multiple data sources were utilized to triangulate the findings and ensure validity:

- **Document Review:** Analysis of official OAQA accreditation criteria, institutional quality assurance (QA) reports, government policy papers, and relevant academic literature to understand the formal accreditation framework and quality assurance practices.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Primary data were collected through interviews with quality assurance managers, academic leaders, and administrative staff from selected Omani HEIs, including ministry-run colleges. The interviews focused on participants' experiences with accreditation procedures, challenges faced, the use of QA tools, and the role of digital technologies.
- **Secondary Data Integration:** Existing research findings, such as the national evaluation of QA instruments (Al-Amri et al., 2021), the MSc dissertation on ministry-run institutions– (Almuqarshi,

2017), and studies on digital transformation in Omani higher education, were incorporated to enrich and contextualize the primary data.

Table 2. Summary of the Data Sources Used in the Study

Data Source	Description	Purpose
Document Review	OAQA criteria, QA reports, policy papers, academic literature	Understand accreditation framework and QA practices
Semi-Structured Interviews	QA managers, academic staff from HEIs (including ministry-run institutions)	Capture institutional experiences and accreditation challenges
Secondary Data Integration	Prior studies (e.g., Al-Amri et al., Almuqarshi)	Enrich findings and provide context with prior research

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to identify interview participants who were directly involved in accreditation and quality assurance activities. Efforts were made to include representatives from both government-run and autonomous institutions to capture diverse perspectives on accreditation challenges.

Data Analysis

Data from interviews and documents were subjected to thematic analysis, which involved the following steps:

- Coding textual data to identify key themes related to institutional readiness, QA implementation, digital adoption, and accreditation barriers.
- To highlight specific challenges and best practices, themes across different institutional types should be compared.
- To corroborate and extend the primary findings, insights from secondary studies should be synthesized.
- Relating findings to OAQA accreditation standards to assess institutional alignment and gaps.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, securing informed consent from all the interviewees and guaranteeing confidentiality through anonymization. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards before the data were collected.

Limitations

While the case study offers a deep contextual understanding, its findings are specific to Oman and may not be fully generalizable to other Gulf states with different accreditation systems. Additionally, limited

access to some ministry-run institutions constrained the sample size. Nonetheless, the methodology provides a robust framework for examining accreditation navigation within the Arab Gulf context.

DATA AND COLLECTION

Data Sources

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources to comprehensively investigate the accreditation process within Omani higher education institutions.

Table 3. Overview of Primary and Secondary Data Sources

Type of Data	Source/Tool	Purpose
Primary Data	Semi structured interviews with QA managers, academic staff	To gather real-time experiences and perceptions on accreditation
Secondary Data	OAQA guidelines, QA reports, institutional documents	To understand formal frameworks and QA practices
	Academic research (e.g., Al-Amri, Almuqarshi)	To enrich and contextualize findings

- **Primary Data:**
  The primary data consisted of qualitative insights gathered through semi structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in accreditation and quality assurance. These participants included quality assurance managers, academic leaders, and administrative staff from a purposive sample of Omani HEIs, including those operating under government ministries. The interviews explored their perspectives on accreditation challenges, institutional readiness, quality assurance practices, and the impact of digital transformation on the accreditation process.

- **Secondary Data:**
  Secondary data were drawn from a thorough review of relevant documents and prior research studies. This included
  - Official accreditation frameworks and guidelines published by the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA).
  - Institutional quality assurance reports and policy documents from selected HEIs.
  - Scholarly articles, theses, and evaluation reports related to quality assurance and accreditation in Oman and the broader GCC region.
  - Recent empirical research such as Al-Amri et al. (2021) on QA instruments, Almuqarshi's (2017) dissertation on ministry-run institutions, and studies on digital adoption in Omani higher education.

Data Collection Process

- **Interviews:**
  Interviews were conducted using a semi structured format, allowing flexibility to probe for detailed responses while covering key thematic areas. Interviewees were contacted via email and phone, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through video conferencing platforms, depending on availability. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent for accurate transcription.
- **Document Review:**
  Relevant accreditation policies, QA frameworks, institutional self-assessment reports, and audit findings were collected from publicly available sources and institutional databases. These documents were systematically analysed to extract information on accreditation criteria, quality assurance mechanisms, and institutional performance.

Data Management and Preparation

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Transcripts and documents were organized using qualitative data analysis software to facilitate coding and thematic analysis. Secondary data were catalogued and summarized to support the triangulation and validation of the primary findings.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of navigating academic accreditation in Omani higher education institutions (HEIs) and provides insights into the interplay between institutional readiness, quality assurance practices, and digital transformation efforts.

Institutional Readiness and Organization Challenges

Consistent with Almuqarshi's (2017) findings, ministry-run colleges in Oman continue to face significant structural and organizational barriers in achieving full accreditation compliance. Rigid hierarchies, unclear quality assurance (QA) objectives, and limited ownership among staff impede the effective implementation of accreditation standards. This lack of centralized QA oversight leads to fragmented efforts that hinder progress, especially in institutions where decision-making is bureaucratically controlled. These challenges underscore the critical need for establishing centralized QA units with clear mandates to drive consistent quality improvement and alignment with the Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA) framework.

Quality Assurance Instruments and Practices

This research aligns with that of Al-Amri et al. (2021), who confirm that while various QA instruments, such as surveys, internal reviews, and feedback mechanisms, are widely employed, their strategic utilization remains limited. Many staff members perceive QA activities as procedural formalities rather than integral tools for continuous institutional enhancement. This disconnect reduces the effectiveness

of the data collected and curtails its use in evidence-based decision-making. Enhancing staff training and fostering a culture that values quality assurance as a core institutional mission could improve data integration and meaningful use of QA outputs.

Digital Transformation as an Enabler and Challenge

The accelerating digital transformation in Oman's higher education sector presents both opportunities and complexities. The increased adoption of digital platforms and learning analytics, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almahri et al., 2024), provides opportunities for better data collection, monitoring, and reporting in accreditation processes. However, challenges such as digital literacy gaps, uneven infrastructure, and varying levels of institutional readiness complicate the effective use of digital tools for quality assurance purposes. Strategic investments in technology, alongside capacity-building initiatives, are essential to harness the full potential of digitalization in supporting accreditation goals.

Policy and Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that Oman's accreditation journey, while marked by progress, requires sustained policy attention to overcome persistent obstacles. Greater decentralization of QA responsibilities, increased professional development opportunities, and clearer institutional accountability frameworks are necessary to strengthen compliance with accreditation standards. Furthermore, policies that promote integrated QA systems supported by robust digital infrastructure enhance the coherence and sustainability of accreditation outcomes.

Declarations

Contribution to GCC Accreditation Discourse

Oman's experience reflects broader regional trends within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where countries strive to reconcile international accreditation demands with local governance realities. By examining Omani institutions' challenges and responses, this study offers valuable lessons for similar GCC contexts aiming to balance centralized control with institutional autonomy and to leverage digital tools in quality assurance frameworks.

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Figures

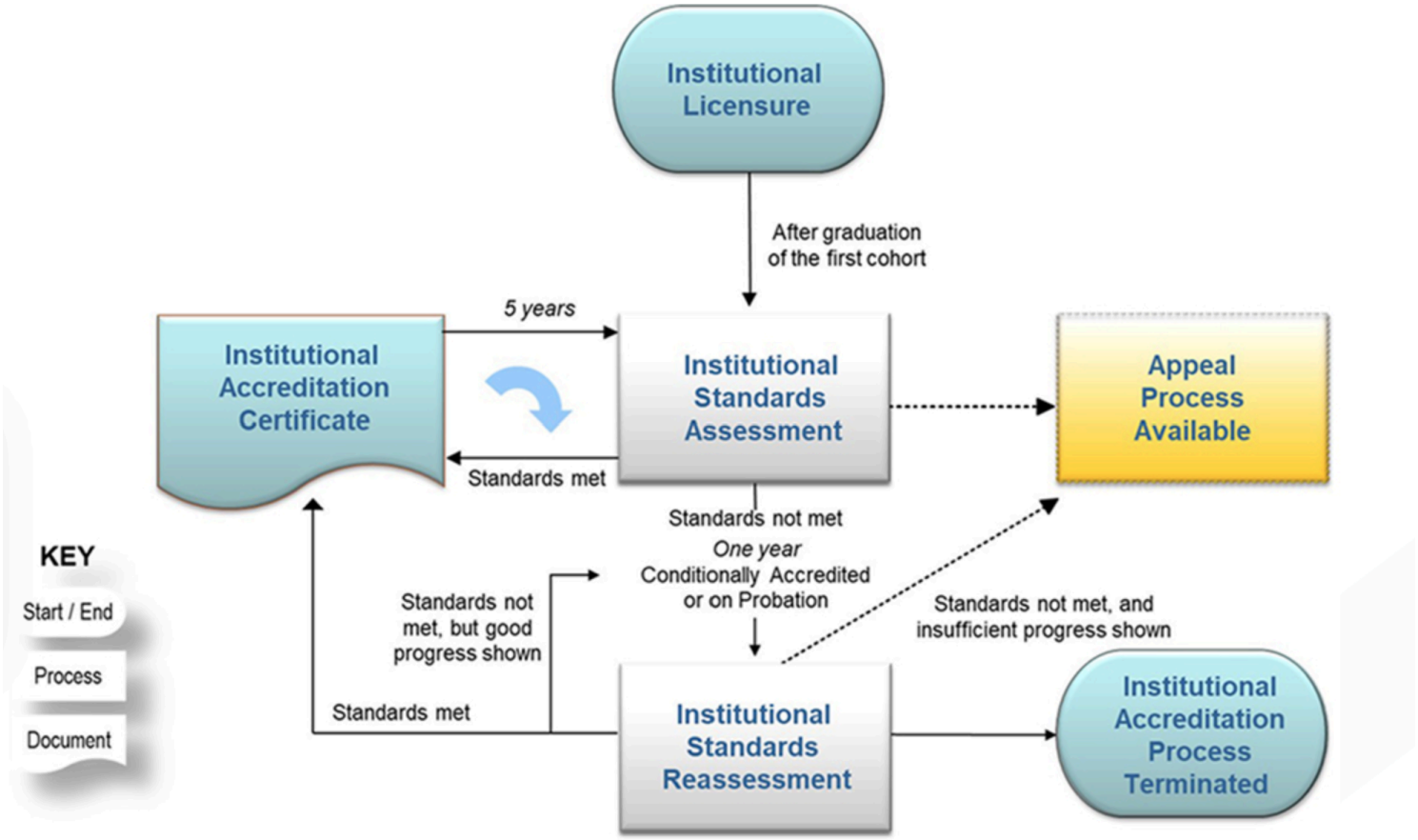


Figure 1

Figure 1. Institutional accreditation process and decision pathways.
This figure illustrates the institutional accreditation lifecycle, beginning with institutional licensure and progressing to an institutional standards assessment conducted after the graduation of the first cohort. If standards are met, an institutional accreditation certificate is granted, valid for five years before reassessment. If standards are not met, the institution may receive conditional accreditation or be placed on probation for one year, followed by a reassessment. Institutions demonstrating sufficient progress may achieve accreditation upon reassessment, while those failing to show improvement may have their accreditation process terminated. An appeal process is available at specified decision points. The diagram also includes key indicators distinguishing processes, documents, and start/end points.