

Report on the Oman Quality Network Quality Audit – Learning by Sharing Seminar

Introduction

The formal audit visits of the OAC for the first stage accreditation of HEIs in Oman started in 2008. Currently, a handful of these institutions have been already visited and are awaiting the formal OAC reports of the audit visits. More HEIs are preparing for their turn to be visited by the OAC panel within the next three to four years. As part of the Oman Quality Network's assistance to these latter institutions, a seminar on Quality Audit – Learning by Sharing is conducted. This aims to discuss common issues tackled by audited institutions, as well as common best practices experienced and done, for the others who are still preparing for accreditation to learn from them.

Seminar Topics

The aims of the OQN seminar are four-fold: share experiences of HEIs that have been through the quality audit process, discuss main issues that have arisen from the quality audit process, assist HEIs who have not undergone the process for the quality audit, compile recommendations for improvement of the OAC's quality audit from the sector.

To accomplish this, the OQN chose six topics or issues that are of utmost importance, particularly to those institutions that are busy preparing for the formal audit visit. The six topics presented are: The Self-Study: Our Experience, Writing the Quality Audit Portfolio, Preparing Stakeholders for the Audit Visit, Logistics and Coordination for the Audit Visit, Reflections on the OAC Audit Manual, and Reflections on the Audit Interviews.

The first topic, "The Self-Study: Our Experience" was presented by Dr. Shoba Zachariah, Dean of Majan College. In her presentation, Dr. Shoba reiterated the importance of collective work in coming up with a comprehensive description of the institution's existing systems and processes through critical analysis of data. She also emphasized the important role that a steering committee plays in making sure that the institution does not deviate from its goals and objectives during preparation for the audit visit.

Mrs. Ghadna Al-Maskari, Asst. Dean of Administration and Finance of Ibra College of Technology, presented the second topic entitled "Writing the Quality Audit Portfolio". In her presentation, Mrs. Ghadna informed the audience the importance of following the ADRI model in organizing and writing the portfolio. She also gave focus on the importance of assigning a small group in the development of the QA Portfolio so as to minimize time making sure that the final document is coherent and has a single style of writing only.

The third speaker is Ms. Annie Lajinian, Director of the Foundation Program of Dhofar University. Ms. Annie talked about the topic “Preparing the Stakeholders for the Audit Visit”. She narrated to the audience what Dhofar University had done to prepare various stakeholders – lecturers, students, parents, employers, etc – for Audit Interviews. She said that the most important thing the institution can do in preparing for this is to make sure that all preparation activities that the institution is doing for the audit visit be made transparent to the stakeholders. She also emphasized the importance of awareness seminars/dialogues so that everybody knows what there is needed to be known. This, she said, is the most important preparation that the HEI can do for their stakeholders.

The fourth topic discussed about “Logistics and Coordination”. This topic was presented by Mr. Swaminathan Balaji, QA Committee Coordinator of Ibri College of Applied Sciences. Mr. Balaji gave the audience a walkthrough of his college’s preparation, as well as actual experiences, in coordinating various stakeholders that will be interviewed and other logistical activities they did such as preparing interview rooms and other related matters, during the OAC Audit Visit. Mr. Balaji stated that the most important lessons that they learned from the experience are: importance of transparency, having a culture of teamwork, inculcation of loyalty in regards to their staff, and community outreach.

The fifth topic was “Reflections on OAC Manual”. Dr. Salha Issan from the College of Education of Sultan Qaboos University presented the topic. Dr. Issan first provided the seminar attendees with a review of the OAC Manual, and then proceeded on sharing her thoughts on how to prepare for the self-study using the manual as guide, as well as how to get quality data during the self-study process. Dr. Salha also provided some insights on how to make best use of ADRI in the development of the QA Portfolio.

The last two topics are reflections on the Quality Audit Interviews. These were presented by two staff from Oman Medical College, Dr. Diane Beattie, Dean of Bowshar Campus, and Dr. Salah Khusaiby, Dean of Sohar Campus. In their presentations, both speakers provided the audience with brief backgrounds of the college in terms of their respective campuses. They also gave a brief review of the preparations they made for the audit visit – the issues and challenges they faced, as well as the overall experience. Dr. Diane emphasized the importance of being truthful, as well as staying clam and relaxed during the interview, while Dr. Salah gave focus on the interview experience itself, stating that aside from being helpful and useful, it improved the internal working relationship in the college by identifying the areas of strengths and weaknesses.

After all the presentations and discussions of issues for each individual topic presented, a plenary discussion and culling of recommendations were done through the moderation of Dr. Salim Al-Radhawi of the OAC.

Seminar Observations

Following are some observations by the author during his attendance to the seminar:

Best Practices

1. There should be harmony between senior and junior management during the self-study preparation. This could be done through regular meetings between them to keep the junior management aware of what's going on in terms of the institution's preparation regarding the self-study.
2. Staff should be empowered and be made comfortable by making them participate in the ownership of the process. That is, staff should be made regularly aware, and be motivated to instill in them that the quality process is not only the work of some select guys, but should be the work of the whole college community.
3. Small focus groups should be formed and tasked to conduct series of orientation and/or awareness meetings/seminars to various stakeholders.
4. Importance of transparency and accountability.
5. Development and writing of the portfolio was done across the institution and not by departments. (Correspondingly, the documentation was done by committees and not by departments. In terms of documents needed in the QA Portfolio)
6. Training of committees in the use of QA Manual and in data collection, as well as development of various forms needed to document various activities and operations.

Challenges

1. Shift from ROSQA groupings to OAC QA Manual Domains grouping
2. Lack of QA specialized staff in the institutions
3. Problems and issues arising from administrative staff "reviewing" themselves (probably because of lack of experience and technical quality assurance knowledge)
4. Issue of bringing "ownership" and commitment to the staff, in terms of government institutions
5. General management of staff workload (as QA activities are done as additional workload)
6. Stakeholders' familiarization with the institution's Quality Audit Portfolio, as well as the general audit process and the institution's numerous processes and systems.

Conclusion

The OQN Seminar provided the HEIs with a glimpse of what happens during the audit visit. More importantly, they were provided with accounts of actual preparations done by other institutions and how these preparations helped the institutions during the actual audit visits. These can be very useful benchmarks by which institutions can further move forward.

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