Optimal Standards to Measure the Quality of Higher Education Institutions in Oman: Stakeholders’ Perception

Amal Said Al-Amri¹, Priya Mathew², Yong Zulina Zubairi¹, and Rohana Jani¹

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly being held accountable for maintaining quality in their activities by governments, industry, students, and the community as a whole. Accreditation agencies formulate assessment criteria covering the entire range of HEI activities so that the quality of HEI activities can be measured. However, as the perceptions of stakeholders vary as to what makes a good HEI, it is crucial to investigate their opinions about the standards set by these agencies. This study uses focus group discussions involving Omani HEI stakeholders, including students, HEI staff, and employers, to gain insights into their perceptions on the most significant standards set by Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) in measuring the quality of HEIs. It was found that stakeholders’ views of the key standards that measure HEI quality vary. Students were in favor of the standards related to the quality of teaching and learning. Students also show a good level of awareness about employers’ priorities. Employers were more concerned about the research skills of graduates and their industry and community involvement. There was also some agreement between staff and employers on the importance of governance and management. This study provides HEIs, OAAA, and partner universities insights into stakeholder priorities and concerns.

Keywords

accreditation, stakeholders’ perceptions, higher education, quality assurance, standards, Sultanate of Oman

Introduction and Background

The role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has been continuously evolving toward greater interaction and responsibility with regard to the various communities that have specific demands on the higher education sector. In addition to teaching and research, HEIs have certain economic and social functions in today’s knowledge-based economies (Jongbloed et al., 2008). The expansion in the role of universities, therefore, has provided them with a “public” character (Neave, 2000, p. 2) along with associated benefits such as substantial funding and autonomy. This led to a need for public accountability and evaluation of the quality of HEIs (Goos & Salomons, 2017). In addition, the higher education (HE) sector has become competitive and customer-oriented due to the rise in student numbers (Dužević et al., 2015). In this context, HEIs have “an obligation to demonstrate quality, efficiency and effectiveness” (Jongbloed et al., 2008, p. 306) and their very survival depends on their ability to convince their primary stakeholders.

Accreditation bodies were developed at national and international levels for setting standards against which to evaluate the quality of HEIs. Almost all HEIs aspire to be accredited by these accreditation bodies. The different standards set by accreditation bodies and the border quality assurance systems “are intertwined with the wills and agendas of the stakeholders involved (namely government, accreditors, and HEIs)” (Cheng, 2015, p. 1,018). HEIs are challenged with the complexity of identifying differences and similarities in the processes and standards set by these bodies. HEI professionals leading accreditation processes therefore struggle with the complexity involved in meeting the various criteria set by accreditation bodies (Cheng, 2015; Ramirez, 2015; Wilkerson, 2017; Zhang & Gao, 2012). According to Johnson (2019), in the United States, there are “growing concerns surrounding accreditation, what it means to students, how it impacts and assures quality of academic programs” (p. 181). So, the perceptions of stakeholders about the standards and their importance vary based on their needs.

¹University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
²Middle East College, Muscat, Oman

Corresponding Author:
Amal Said Al-Amri, Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Email: amaloman@siswa.um.edu.my
HEIs as well as accreditation agencies are thus forced to balance the interests of all stakeholders in meeting and setting standards, specifically at national level.

Generally, stakeholders such as “representatives from teaching academics, students, employers, professional bodies, governments or funding agencies, accreditors and academic unions” are involved in setting accreditation standards (Sadler, 2017, p. 14). In the Sultanate of Oman (henceforth Oman), the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) involved different stakeholders during the process of setting the Institutional Accreditation Standards (ISA). Various stakeholder groups participated in the National Symposium on Institutional and Program Standards which was conducted in October 2013 including students, quality assurance managers, deans, deputy deans, vice-chancellors, and officials in government sectors and national societies (OAAA, 2013). However, these representatives did not include employers and teaching staff, whose feedback can be seen as critical while setting quality standards as pointed out by Alzafari and Ursin (2019). As a consequence, there is a gap that does not take into account all stakeholders. In short, it is imperative to investigate staff, employer, and student perspectives on quality so that HEIs can articulate what they have to offer (Dicker et al., 2018) to the ecosystem of HEIs. The scope of this study is to examine the perceptions of different main stakeholders about the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) set by OAAA. This research seeks to address the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Which of the nine standards are critical in measuring the quality of HEIs in Oman?
Research Question 2: What are the commonalities and differences in perspectives among staff, students, and employers regarding what they consider the most important of the nine standards?

To answer the research questions, data were gathered from focus group discussions (FGDs) with students and staff from different HEIs in Oman, in addition to employers from the industry using the standard protocols of qualitative research.

The rest of the article is organized in the following manner: the “Literature Review” section presents the literature review, the “Stakeholder Theory in HE” discusses the theoretical foundation about the importance of stakeholders’ perspectives, the “Research Method” explains the research method, and the “Results and Findings” and “Discussion of Findings” sections present and discuss the findings, followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

It is important for organizations to ensure the quality of their services or products, and this helps organizations achieve customer satisfaction (Sunder & Antony, 2018). The concept of quality in HE is difficult to define because it is complex, dynamic, and contextual (Brockerhoff et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2008). The UNESCO described quality assurance in HE as “a multidimensional concept which must involve all its functions and activities” (da Costa Vieira & Raguenet Troccoli, 2012, p. 19). Moreover, it is essential to understand that stakeholders of HEIs have different perceptions of what makes a quality HEI because they are based on their interests and needs (Akhter & Ibrahim, 2016; Al Tobi & Duque, 2015; Pham, 2019; Schindler et al., 2015; Sunder, 2016a).

In the 1980s, the need for quality assurance in the service sector was recognized with the service sector becoming the primary economic factor in industrialized countries. This encouraged the development of SERVQUAL, the first quality measurement tool for the service sector (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). SERVQUAL is still widely used by HEIs worldwide for quality assurance needs. Abdullah (2006) created a similar tool, HEDPERF, specifically for HEIs, to collect student data that allow institutions to determine the quality of their services. This method is also followed in various parts of the world (Dužević et al., 2015).

Ranking is another practice widely used in the HE sector. Around 40% weight, however, is based on survey data in global rankings such as QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE). The point is that ranking is based on numbers, and numbers have a strong public impact. It has a strong influence on students during HEI selection (Aguillo et al., 2010; Komotar, 2020; Lynch, 2015). University rankings are used by some governments in decision-making processes to award accreditation. In addition, they have a huge impact on financial resource distribution in many countries worldwide (Komotar, 2020).

HEIs are being held accountable for the quality of their products and services by stakeholders such as the government, students, and funding agencies (Jongbloed et al., 2008, 2018; Pham, 2019). Hence, HEIs have developed their internal quality systems to improve their processes and to plan for external quality evaluations such as audits and accreditation. HEIs point out that measurements play an important role in assuring performance (Montgomery, 2007; Widrick et al., 2010). To easily meet accreditation standards, many HEIs around the world have started implementing Lean Six Sigma (LSS), which refers to the integration of two reputed improvement methods: Lean and Six Sigma (Haerizadeh & Sunder, 2019; Sunder, 2016b; Sunder & Antony, 2018; Sunder & Mahalingam, 2018). The demand for information about the quality of HEIs is met through processes such as accreditation where HEIs provide evidence of quality. HEIs are thus compelled to satisfy the standards set by external accreditation agencies. Accreditation has been described as a quality assurance approach which helps HEIs to “enhance quality control, accountability and transparency, and quality enhancement” (Nguyen & Ta, 2018, p. 11). Accreditation helps HEIs earn a good reputation in the community and are
perceived as ensuring “the quality of their products (graduates) provided to the labor market” (Hamadtu et al., 2013, p. 109). Moreover, it is claimed that these exercises help HEIs make significant improvements in their academic and administrative services (Nguyen & Ta, 2018).

Accreditation has been considered as one of the primary methods to ensure quality assurance worldwide (Komotar, 2020). Hence, many countries around the world have national accreditation agencies for HEIs. There are two types of accreditations: institutional or programmatic (Hamadtu et al., 2013) such as Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). The accreditation agencies set standards and indicators, and according to Schindler et al. (2015), there are four main categories for quality indicators set for HEIs; administrative, student support, instructional, and student performance indicators. The standards are different from one agency to another in terms of difficulty and methods used, leading to conflicting opinions. For example, Akera (2017) reported his disagreement with the quantitative method used by ABET for accrediting the engineering programs.

The HE sector in Oman is still relatively young in comparison with well-established universities. The first and only public university was established in 1986 and there were a total of 68 HEIs during the Academic Year 2015–2016 (Higher Education Admission Center, 2016). Global trends such as massification that resulted from adopting an inclusive approach to HE can also be seen in Oman. Students from heterogeneous backgrounds are now able to gain entry to Omani HEIs and student numbers are swelling year by year. All the private HEIs in Oman function as satellite campuses for their partner universities located in diverse parts of the world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Netherlands. In an effort to monitor the quality of HEIs in Oman, OAAA (2016a) was established in 2001 with a vision “to provide efficient, effective and internationally recognized services for accreditation to promote quality in HE in Oman and meet the needs of the public and other stakeholders.” OAAA attempts to ensure transparency in the accreditation processes and results to stakeholders (Ross & Trevor-Roper, 2015). OAAA (2016b) has set nine standards for institutional accreditation, and each HEI in Oman must fulfill the requirements of each standard—Standard 1: Governance and Management; Standard 2: Student Learning by Coursework Programs; Standard 3: Student Learning by Research Programs; Standard 4: Industry and Community Engagement; Standard 5: Academic Support Services; Standard 6: Students and Student Support Services; Standard 7: Staff and Staff Support Services; Standard 8: Staff Research and Consultancy; and Standard 9: General Support Services and Facilities.

**Stakeholder Theory in HE**

With the increased integration of universities with the community due to its expanded socioeconomic responsibilities, the notion of Stakeholder Theory has been applied to the HE sector (Burrows, 1999; Mitchell et al., 1997). Sarrico and Rosa (2014) described HEI customers as students, academic personnel, non-academic personnel, parents, alumni, employers, government, and society as a whole. According to Pereira and Da Silva (2003), HEI customers are either internal customers which refer to those who “receive the outputs of these systems” or external customers which means those who “work in these systems in the process.” The internal customers for teaching processes is therefore different from those for the learning processes. The teacher is the main internal customer in the “teaching” process as he is responsible for delivering the information to the students while the main internal customer in the “learning” phase is the student, as he is the person responsible for obtaining the information. Students have been considered key stakeholders or “key customers” (Abdullah, 2006) in HE (Jongbloed et al., 2008). However, Dobija et al. (2019) described accreditation agencies as the most powerful stakeholder of HEIs.

Perceptions of stakeholder salience is relative as there may be differences in the identification of external stakeholders by groups of internal stakeholders within the organization. These stakeholders may be students, HEI staff, employers of students, and funding agencies (Schindler et al., 2015) and may prioritize particular demands. For example, students are concerned about the quality of the academic programs while employers are looking for qualified employees (Schindler et al., 2015); for parents, the employability of their wards is paramount while for staff members, it is about the learning support services provided, and for institutions, research is the priority (Al Tobi & Duque, 2015). Therefore, quality assurance in HEIs is a complex notion where stakeholders have “different priorities and their focus of attention may be different” (Sunder, 2016a, p. 1,093). Hence, HEIs strive to satisfy all stakeholders and meet their expectations by enhancing the quality of the activities and by ensuring continuous enhancements (Akhter & Ibrahim, 2016).

Mitchell et al.’s (1997) framework of stakeholder salience is a useful tool to identify the various categories of stakeholders and their degree of importance to universities. These categories have been framed in terms of three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. These terms can be explained as the “power” that stakeholders exercise over HEIs to commit to a particular course of action, the “legitimacy” or appropriateness of HEI actions in a social structure comprising beliefs and norms, and “urgency” refers to the extent to which stakeholders can pressure the organization to take immediate action. Although this framework is useful for identifying the various categories of external stakeholders in the increasingly complex and manifold functions of modern universities, there can be no doubt that students and faculty members are core stakeholders. It follows that accreditation agencies need to consider and balance the specific demands of various groups of stakeholders while formulating standards against which universities are assessed for
the effectiveness of their functions and their contribution to the society and economy.

Implementing the national quality assurance systems, in which accreditation plays a crucial role, involves participation of both external and internal stakeholders to HEIs. The self-assessment and external reviews require the participation of managers, staff members, both academics and administrative, and students from various levels. Although this process allows students’ voices to be taken into account, the weight of their voices remains unknown (Quyen, 2019). The state, students, employers, academic staff, or HEIs have different roles and contributions in quality assurance in terms of the three criteria of power, legitimacy, and urgency. According to these roles, stakeholders were classified from the lowest level of salience as latent stakeholders—those who fulfill one criteria, expectant stakeholders—those who fulfill two criteria, or definitive stakeholders—those who fulfill three criteria (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014).

Beerbens and Udam (2017) described the roles of a stakeholder in quality assurance in HE as being characterized by efficacy, credibility, and appropriateness of a regulation or policy. They can also contribute in defining the concept of accountability. In addition, their engagement creates a forum for shaping different views. Pham (2019) explained the significant contribution of the government, employers and representatives of professional bodies, managers of HEIs, students, and academic staff in reforming the quality assurance of HE in Vietnam.

Alzafari and Ursin (2019) studied the involvement of the internal and external stakeholders in the quality assurance standards in European HEIs. These standards are related to quality, design and approval of programs, student-centered learning, student admission, progression, recognition and certification, quality of the teaching staff, learning resources and support for students, information management, public information, and ongoing monitoring and review of programs. Regarding stakeholder engagement, these researchers state that external stakeholders (graduates and the labor market) are evidently less relevant than the internal stakeholders (academics and students) in the design of programs and policies. They also found that the internal engagement of students was the lowest, although student participation had received significant attention in the field of research.

Although the involvement of stakeholders on quality assurance of HE appears to become more geographically widespread, only few studies have been conducted from a national perspective. Pham (2019), for example, studied the contribution of stakeholders in reforming the quality assurance of HE in Vietnam, but the study did not compare between the standards valued by each stakeholder group.

According to Mitchell et al.’s framework, employers and academic staff are stakeholder groups that fulfill the conditions for being “definitive” stakeholders. However, these two groups did not participate in the formulation of the accreditation standards by the OAAA. Hence, this research paper also attempts to fill this gap by demonstrating the different perceptions of a more comprehensive group of stakeholders on the most important standards set for Omani HEIs.

**Research Method**

The FGD was chosen as a method of data collection for this study as deeper insights can be obtained when knowledgeable participants interact and refine their views as the discussion progresses (Carey & Asbury, 2012; Hennink, 2013). FGDs can enable the collection of a variety of viewpoints and therefore this method was found to be appropriate to address the research questions of this study which are about obtaining the perspectives of stakeholders on what constitutes the most important standards.

Three separate FGDs were designed for students, staff members, and prospective employers from the industry. There was a total of 15 participants representing each stakeholder group. They were selected on the basis of certain criteria. It was decided to select students not in their first year of study so that they could provide valid information from their experience of spending a substantial amount of time in an HEI in Oman and could have developed a clear picture of their requirements. Care was taken to ensure a good balance in terms of gender, specializations, and representation from both private and public HEIs. While selecting staff participants, those in their first year of service were not included; they represented various academic and administrative departments, positions, and comprised both genders. Employers represented both public and private sectors in Oman, held various administrative positions, and were from both genders. Three separate FGDs were conducted; one with each stakeholder group. Each FGD consisted of five participants which is an acceptable sample size for qualitative studies (Dworkin, 2012; Hennink, 2013). To maintain confidentiality, the student (STD) participants were named STD-F1, STD-M1, STD-M2, STD-M3, and STD-M4, where F refers to female and M refers to male. Similarly, staff (STF) were named STF-M5, STF-M6, STF-M7, STF-M8, and STF-F2, and employers (EMP) as EMP-F3, EMP-F4, EMP-M9, EMP-M10, and EMP-M11.

The questions for the FGDs were developed by the authors and verified by two professionals having more than 10 years of experience in the field of HE in Oman. The FGDs were organized in July 2018 and each of them took between 1 and 1.5 hr. Participant Information Sheets were handed out to the participants and the sessions were video recorded with their permission. The moderator of the discussions was the first author and the discussions were in English. The transcription was made by an external agency in Intelligent Verbatim style.¹

NVivo 12 was used for data management and analysis of each FGD. In addition, Microsoft Excel, and manual text analysis methods were used in some parts of these analyses. Similarities and variations in the responses from each stakeholder group were then identified.
Results and Findings

During the FGDs, the first researcher raised these two questions to each of the groups of students, staff, and employers. The moderator reminded the participants at the outset that the focus of the discussion would be on their own perceptions, in their particular role as a student, HEI staff, or employer, of the most important standard/s that measures the quality of an HEI. The responses of each group regarding the standard which they considered the most critical in measuring the quality of an HEI in Oman are summarized in the sections below.

Students

There was unanimous consensus among students that Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” is the main standard which measures the quality of any HEI. They (STD-F1 and STD-M1) explained that it is the core function of any academic institution as it is a prerequisite for a good learning experience. As Student STD-F1 pointed out, “if student learning is not that good that means that institution has not achieved its main purpose.” Student STD-M3 added that it is the “most important parameter because it directly reflects the learning experience of the student.” Another student (STD-M2) asserted that this standard reflects the quality of the educational process at any HEI—“I choose Standard 2 because this actually measures the quality of education, . . . we need good courses and learning materials, teaching methods, and qualified and experienced teachers . . . all this is in Standard 2.” Student STD-F1 concurred that Standard 2 is the core of any educational institution and that it should be the focus of any attempt to measure the quality of HEIs:

Therefore, for me as a student when I search for an institution, I’ll be looking for the program at first . . . So, that’s why I think that, always high-quality education is related to how strong the education is in this institution. So, it is student learning by coursework programs.

Student STD-M4 joined the discussion saying that it is critical to monitor the design and delivery of programs because as a student, he was not satisfied with the design of his own course because of the lack of a practical training component in the syllabus. He attributed this to a lack of emphasis on the “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” standard by the HEI.

In addition, some students said that Standard 6: “Academic Support Services” is also a good measure of the quality of HEIs. That is because this standard supports the learning experience by providing adequate teaching materials and infrastructure. As Student STD-M3 stated, “the most important is the second standard, Academic Support Services, because it will prepare, support, and enhance the academic staff and their tools or their teaching aids which they use to deliver the information to the students.” Another student (STD-F1) supported his point by saying that the academic support should be central to any set of standards seeking to assess the quality of education: “we are talking about education institutions. So, when academic support and academics is not good, it will always mean that this institution is not providing students with high quality education.”

Student STD-M1 believed that Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement” is the standard that differentiates HEIs. He claimed that no HEI can function without proper learning materials, staff, and infrastructure; therefore, strong indicators of the quality of an HEI are the training opportunities and engagement with the community and industry provided to the students.

Student STD-M1 asserted that Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement” is an important standard, especially since the industry preferred to offer jobs to students who had some industry experience. Most students seemed to think that this Standard is especially important in recent times; as one participant pointed out, “nowadays, this standard has become more important.” Another student (STD-M2) spoke about the need for designing curricula to prepare the students to take up jobs and for assignments that simulated the type of tasks done by professionals, in his case, Mechanical Engineers. This point, however, is related to Standard 2, although it arose out of a discussion of Standard 5.

Student STD-F1 agreed with him and she added that community service is an important aspect that influenced students’ choice of HEI. She added that she had joined her university because she knew that the vision of the institution was focused on contributing to the society. She emphasized that “If not, if they’re only concerned with the academic side, then they’re not building the future graduates that the society is wanting.”

Three students (STD-F1, STD-M2, and STD-M3) mentioned that there is one more important standard which is Standard 8: “Staff and Staff Support Services” because academic and support staff members play an important role in the student experience at any HEI: “the quality of the staff members is also important” (STD-M2).

The student STD-F1 mentioned at the end of the discussion that these standards are all important and inter-related. She also added that these standards helped the student through the journey at the HEI—“So these standards are all related and I believe that, all of these aspects and criteria build the students from the very beginning, until they graduate.”

Staff

Generally, all the staff participants of the FGD had the perception that the standards set by OAAA included all the criteria required to assess the quality of HEIs. As Staff STF-F2 said, “my personal viewpoint, I feel the framework that they have adopted is really of good standard. They’re comprehensive, many important parameters and criteria for
HEIs are considered." Staff STF-M5 agreed with this viewpoint.

In the FGD that ensued, it was apparent that most staff members strongly believed that all the standards are equally important to measure the quality of HEIs collectively, and thus, one cannot use any single standard alone to measure the quality. Staff STF-M7 iterated that, “it’s a link, it’s a chain, if you pull out one link from it, they will not complement each other.” According to Staff STF-F2, all the standards encapsulate all the necessary elements in measuring the quality of the HEI because quality in academic services cannot be ensured without proper administrative and other support service mechanisms:

So, you are looking at the learning but while trying to do that what are your other support mechanisms? What sort of services, what facilities, what sort of organizational structure is going to be conducive towards this? Once these are examined, the entire thing falls into place.

One participant (STF-M8), however, stated that all the standards cannot be ranked equally in terms of measuring the quality of HE institutions in Oman. STF-M6 responded that some standards are more closely related to students than others; so, HEIs should give them more attention. As he pointed out, “there are standards which would have immediate and direct implications on the quality of education. These standards should be the first ones to focus on.”

Moreover, there are some other standards which provide support to the main standard which is Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs.” STF-M8 also concurred that all standards cannot be ranked equally. He expressed the opinion that Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” has a direct impact on student learning because it is related to the teaching and assessment processes, and therefore, should be ranked first among the standards. He ranked them as follows—Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs,” Standard 7: “Students and Student Support Services Programs,” Standard 3: “Student Learning by Research,” Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement,” and Standard 8: “Staff and Staff Support Services.” He rationalized his preferences by adding that all the skills are important. STF-F2 once again reiterated the point that she had made earlier that HEIs should concentrate on all aspects related to student life, from enrollment until graduation. She added,

On one side you are focusing on your products, students who are coming out into the market. But while doing that what are the sets of processes, or procedures, or mechanisms that one would need to put in place to ensure that you are producing well-rounded graduates.

Similarly, STF-M6 said that Standard 2 is the core standard as it shows the quality of the education and graduates of any HEI and they are the ultimate factors that influence the reputation of an HEI. He noted that Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” “is the heart of any quality assurance mechanism for HEIs because our students will retain this long after they have graduated . . . we will be known by our products.”

Staff STF-M5 stated that Standard 1: “Governance and Management” is the most important standard measuring the quality of HEIs because “policies and procedures are the starting point of any HEI.”

Another point that was raised during this FGD was the suitability and relevance of the nine standards to all types of HEIs in Oman and the accreditation agencies involved. Staff STF-M7 pointed out that two important factors governed the quality monitoring processes of HEIs—the specialty of the HEI and the number of students enrolled. He pointed out that the infrastructure and the resources required change according to the specialty of the HEI, and therefore, there should be different bodies auditing HEIs based on the field. He cited the example of Indian medical colleges that are monitored by an agency specialized in this field. He also pointed out that some HEIs in Oman are much smaller in terms of student numbers compared with other HEIs. The OAAA standards were indiscriminately applied to all HEIs and this is not fair since the smaller HEIs might have the intent but do not yet have the resources to realize their plans. This situation leads to an unfair monopoly for the bigger HEIs when the smaller HEIs might have phased plans for implementation of quality mechanisms but are not given the chance.

Three of the staff members started a discussion on how the accreditation panel should conduct their investigations. The first point raised by Staff STF-M7 was related to the subjectivity of the accreditation process. He opined that the auditors merely focused on those standards related to their own specialization. He cited the example of an IT specialist who examined the quality of library services in an HEI. He pointed out that he only looked at the technical details . . . whether the resources are well-arranged, digitized . . . he did not check whether adequate books are there for all the programmes that are offered, that the current version is available . . . Nothing.

The second point, raised by Staff STF-F2, was about the stakeholder group the auditors should meet to measure the quality of HEIs. She believed that the auditors should focus on the students during their audit visit because “the end point is student satisfaction.” However, Staff STF-M5 disagreed with this view and felt that staff satisfaction is more important because if they are not satisfied, the students will not be satisfied.

Employers

The employers emphasized the importance of the research capacity of graduates. Hence, they perceived that Standard 3: “Student Learning by Research” and Standard 4: “Staff
Research and Consultancy” are very important standards. The discussion opened with the first research question which is about the standard that is the most important to measure the quality of HE. According to Employer EMP-F3, faculty members who have a strong research background are crucial because they can then keep the students abreast of the latest developments in their field. They stated that such teachers can transfer these skills and knowledge to their students. EMP-M11 also echoed the same point and linked it to Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement” as one of the most important standards. He emphasized that students in HE should engage in research for the benefit of the community:

For me, I would say that these two standards are the most important Ones-Standard 4 and 5, Student Learning by Research and Industry and Community Engagement . . . in top universities internationally, the good graduates engage with their communities through research . . . you need to combine theory and practice. Sometimes students are very good in research and in theories, but they are not good in using their tools to make use of that knowledge. So, having these two together is really very important.

Similarly, Employer EMP-M10 emphasized the integration of research skills and their application to the solution of practical problems which he said are very important skills for graduates to get jobs. He cited an example of how his institution, the National Center of Information and Statistics, had signed a contract with one of the leading HEIs in Oman to train students to apply their knowledge to applied fields such as Finance and Management.

EMP-F4 concurred that a good HEI should encourage its researchers to conduct studies on issues related to the community through a dedicated department for this purpose. Employer EMP-M9 agreed that Standard 5 is an important standard because the reputation of the HEI is enhanced from its engagement with industry and the community and this will ensure that graduates get jobs. He added,

I’ve been working with many employers. From the government, from the private sector, from everywhere . . . some colleges in Oman . . . I don’t want to mention their name . . . if graduates from such colleges apply for a job, employers will even refuse to interview them. But if the graduate is from a college that is known for its focus on research-led teaching and close partnerships with the industry, they will directly interview him. This is because of the reputation of the college and also because the curriculum is informed by industry inputs and therefore, there is less cost and time involved in training the student.

According to the employer (EMP-M9), good HEIs are those that encourage their students to take up live projects assigned to help the community. Employer EMP-F3 supported this viewpoint by stating that students need to be attuned with trends in the industry, especially technological developments. Employer EMP-F3 added that HEIs should offer effective “Students and Student Support Services” (Standard 7), especially to counsel students about employment prospects. However, she stressed that although these standards (Standards 5 and 7) are important, the personality and personal attributes of the graduate are the most important criteria in getting selected for a job. Therefore, extracurricular and cocurricular activities have as much a part to play in the holistic development of the student as the academic programs. EMP-F4 emphasized this point, adding that,

Some graduates of a good HEI haven’t managed to find jobs as yet . . . why do you think so? I totally believe that the graduates get jobs because of their personal skills such as technical skills and ability to sell himself or herself. The institution they come from has little influence; however, HEIs should provide maximum opportunities to students to develop knowledge and skills in their field as well as soft skills.

Employer EMP-M10, who was an employee in one of the HEIs in Oman, held that Standard 1: “Governance and Management” is the most important standard because “you cannot have quality in HE without strong governance and management structures and mechanisms.” He pointed out that MOHE asked for regular reports on the activities of HEIs in Oman, with an emphasis on matters related to governance and management. Employer EMP-M11 also declared that the most important standard to measure the quality of HEIs is Standard 1 “because Governance and Management is really key. Actually, if you don’t have that, you will not have all the other systems.”

Table 1 presents a summary of the responses of the participants of the three groups to the question “which of these standard/s do you feel is/are really measure/s the quality of HEIs in Oman?.” It is clear that Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement” and Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” are the top ranked standards. The last row shows the number of participants who agreed that all standards are equally important.

**Discussion of Findings**

The influence of stakeholders of HEIs can enhance or diminish the reputation of an institution and also have an impact on student numbers; therefore, it is important for HEIs to seek out what stakeholders perceived as the most important measures of quality. The results obtained from FGDs conducted to investigate the perceptions of three different groups of stakeholders namely, students, staff, and employers are in alignment with the findings of previous studies (Akhter & Ibrahim, 2016; Al Tobi & Duque, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015; Sunder, 2016a).

Students believe that the standards related to teaching and learning are the most important ones followed by the quality of academic staff. Therefore, they ranked Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs,” Standard 6: “Academic Support Services,” and Standard 8: “Staff and
All the standards are equally important. They also spoke about the importance of having good training opportunities (Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement”). These findings further support the idea of Schindler et al. (2015) that students are most concerned about the quality of the academic programs. Hence, HEIs should implement “the principles of student-centred learning within their programmes” (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019, p. 15). The perceptions of these students match the points discussed by Sunder and Antony (2018) and Beerkens and Udam (2017) that students believe that one of the fundamental purposes of HEIs is to provide them with the skills and knowledge which will help them find suitable career opportunities. The situation in Omani HEIs is somehow similar to the European HEIs as discussed by Alzafari and Ursin (2019) where students are involved in selecting “the diversity of learning paths, the variety of learning delivery methods, the evaluation of the teaching methods and the autonomy of the learner” (p. 10) more than involving in the quality assurance activities such as “examination methods, appeal procedures, the methods of assessment and the learning feedback given to students” (p. 10).

However, most of the staff members of HEIs felt that all the standards are equally important in assessing the quality of HEIs although they too thought that Standard 2: “Student Learning by Coursework Programs” is the core standard. Yet, another staff member selected Standard 1: “Governance and Management” because it is related to the policies and procedures which are the foundation of any institution. So, they understand the importance of the quality assurance policies and as stated by Pham (2019), that especially the academic staff members “claimed to be able to transform quality assurance policies into actual measures” (p. 151). Most of the staff were emphatic in their assertion that the standards set by OAAA are comprehensive criteria for measurement of quality of HEIs in Oman. This further confirms the idea of Beerkens and Udam (2017) that staff of HEIs value quality assurance systems and procedures. Moreover, staff members were very much aware about practicality of the preparation for accreditation more than other stakeholders. As stated by Dobija et al. (2019), they knew that HEIs “collect required data and submit reports within the international accreditation framework” (p. 93). Similar to the findings of Beerkens and Udam (2017), staff raised a few points on how the conduct of the auditing process might be improved: by the allocation of specialized accreditation agencies depending on the type of courses offered by the HEI, by trying to eliminate subjectivity in the emphasis on certain criteria, and by meetings with specific stakeholder groups such as faculty members or students. There are several possible explanations for this opinion. First, the pressure is lower in public HEIs than in private ones (Dobija et al., 2019). Second, teaching staff are usually the experts of the auditing teams (Pham, 2019) and in Vietnam, for example, many of them moved from teaching positions at universities to quality without receiving any training (Tran & Vu, 2019, p. 107).

The employers’ responses indicate that they placed more importance on research and community engagement, Standards 4 and 5. They pointed out that employers are looking for graduates with good research abilities. They also believed that Standard 5: “Industry and Community Engagement” is important because it plays a strong role in building the reputation of institutions. One of the employers also said that Standard 1: “Governance and Management” is also important for any HEI while another employer added Standard 7: “Students and Student Support Services” because of its importance in increasing the employability of graduates. These results confirm that employers are looking for qualified employees in terms of research and technical skills, a finding similar to that of (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Schindler et al., 2015). Employers are also aware that the good governance and management of HEIs is very critical and it leads to success or failure in accreditation which confirms the findings of Beerkens and Udam (2017). This further supports the idea of Pham (2019) of the role of employers and professional bodies in quality assurance activities as “key actors with regard to employability” (p. 149) in addition to their direct participation in designing and reviewing the academic program.

There are some commonalities and differences in the perceptions of all the three stakeholders regarding the most important standards that measure the quality of an HEI.
Students were strongly in favor of Standard 2 since it is directly concerned with teaching and learning and this preference for Standard 2 can also be seen in the stance adopted by two of the staff members. This perception of students is also echoed by Pham (2019) who explains that accreditation processes are seen as an effective method to assess teaching and learning standards.

The employers, on the hand, had very different perceptions of the most important standards that measure the quality of an HEI which is different from the current quality assurance systems which place “specific characteristics of a university in the evaluation and adjust standards accordingly” (Beerkens & Udam, 2017, p. 10). Similar to the findings of Schindler et al. (2015) and Beerkenes and Udam (2017), they were overwhelmingly in favor of research, and industry and community engagement. They view employability skills, industry-readiness of graduates, and their ability to solve practical problems through research and community engagement as the most important attributes because of advantages such as cost and effort reduction in training new employees. Interestingly, students were also aware that industry and community engagement increased their value in the job market. These findings point to the need for HEIs to forge closer ties with the industry to inform the curriculum and also articulate this emphasis of their programs to students as well as employers so that they are convinced of the employability of fresh graduates. So, although there are some efforts made to engage stakeholders in Oman in setting the standards, the situation is still blurred in terms of level of engagement. The current situation in the quality assessment of Omani HEIs is similar to that in Vietnam (Pham, 2019; Quyen, 2019).

There was also some agreement between staff and employer perspectives on Standard 1: “Governance and Management,” which both felt are important since they formed the basis of all the other activities of HEIs. This can be explained by the fact that many HEIs as well as accreditation bodies involved employers in their boards of governance (Pham, 2019). Students understandably did not give importance to the standards not related to teaching and learning.

Interestingly, staff provided some valuable feedback regarding the conduct of accreditation exercises in Oman such as the subjectivity involved in the assessment process during accreditation visits and the most important stakeholders who should be consulted for an accurate evaluation of the quality of the HEI. This suggests that the staff members are the key players in this exercise (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Pham, 2019).

Conclusion

This research paper elucidates the perceptions of students, staff of HEIs in Oman, and employers from the industry about the optimal standard to ensure the quality of HEIs. It was found that these groups ranked the nine standards of ISA differently although there were some similar perceptions on what they considered the most important standards for measuring the quality of HEIs. Students were found to prefer standards related to teaching and learning quality. Employers were more concerned with graduates’ research skills, and industry and community involvement. Staff showed awareness about the accreditation process and gave some suggestions for improvements.

These findings regarding the perspectives of stakeholders could possibly be valuable for HEIs, MOHE, Oman, OAAA and partner universities. They provide valuable pointers on what stakeholders consider important criteria for assessing the quality of an HEI and also how accreditation exercises can be conducted. Considering that Omani HEIs just went through the very first cycle of accreditation, MOHE and OAAA will do well to heed such feedback from stakeholders. Since the results of the accreditation exercise and the scores obtained for each standard will be made public, HEIs should also be aware of such perspectives as they will have an enormous impact on the reputation of the institution and student numbers.

As mentioned earlier, the scope of the study is on stakeholders’ perceptions on quality in Omani HEIs which in turn provides insights to policymakers and stakeholders. It is worthwhile to note that HE in Oman is still relatively young in comparison with other well-established institutions worldwide. Nevertheless, since Omani HEIs are going through the accreditation process, it is critical that investigations of this kind, concerning stakeholders’ perceptions on measurement of their quality, be taken into account by policymakers. The results of this study can prompt further research in the area of quality and accreditation processes in Oman, especially since there has been little contextual research of this type undertaken in the HE sector in this part of the world. Further research based on the results of the first accreditation exercise and a continuous quest for perceptions of stakeholders are crucial. Such research can bring to light contextual factors such as the real needs of the community and the employment sector in Oman. OAAA can then use the insights obtained to balance the interests of the various stakeholders, and devise accreditation mechanisms to address these various needs. The study findings can also be generalized to similar HE sectors such as in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The limitations of this study include the lower than expected number of participants in the FGDs.

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Ethics Statement
This paper conforms to the American Educational Research Association “Code of Ethics” on research.

ORCID iD
Amal Said Al-Amri https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7197-5428

Note
1. It is a clean transcription which excludes conversation fillers such as umm and ahha.

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