Contested Terrain: Academics' Perceptions of the Quality Assurance Processes, Policies and Practices Shaping Academic Work within the Context of Oman

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance (QA) continues to gain increasing global attention as higher education systems expand and diversify in response to massification, internationalisation and demands for accountability. Despite being embedded in many national and institutional frameworks for decades, QA remains a growing concern, particularly regarding its conceptualisation, implementation, and impacts on academic work. Academic staff, as key stakeholders in delivering education, are at the forefront of experiencing and interpreting QA processes, policies and practices. This study examines academics' perceptions of how QA processes, policies, and practices shape academic work in higher education in Oman. The context of this study is the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) with a focus on teaching aspects, performance appraisal, and professional development.

A qualitative case study methodology was employed across three academic colleges in four UTAS branches. The study used semi-structured interviews with 18 academic staff members, conducted via Zoom, as the primary data collection method. It is supplemented by document research to provide contextual understanding and enrich the data. Thematic analysis was applied to identify themes and meanings within participants' experiences. NVivo software was used to manage and organise the qualitative data, enabling systematic coding and development of themes. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research to account for my positionality and interpretation.

The analysis presents two interconnected dimensions of QA: implementation and impact. Findings reveal that participants perceived the implementation of the QA system as dominated by compliance-oriented mechanisms, superficial engagement and bureaucratic documentation that marginalises genuine academic voice. Participants reported significant changes in their academic work, namely curriculum, pedagogical approaches and assessment practices. However, observable changes appeared to be driven more by external factors, such as technological developments and COVID-19 disruptions, than QA mechanisms themselves. Participants also reported intensified teaching standardisation pressures, the surveillant performance appraisal system and mandatory professional development requirements. The findings reveal interwoven

tensions and persistent questions that echo global debates on QA in higher education. Key concerns include the continued lack of a conceptual consensus on the definition and purpose of QA, the prioritisation of compliance over academic improvement, and bureaucratic processes that constrain rather than enable autonomy and academic freedom. QA mechanisms at UTAS functioned primarily to ensure conformity and institutional discipline.

This study makes several important research contributions. It contributes to the limited research on QA in the context of Oman by exploring how the QA system shapes academic work. This contribution extends to the broader Gulf and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) contexts, where similar centralised governance and top-down QA policy implementation exist yet remain under-researched. This creates opportunities for comparative research and establishes a baseline for longitudinal investigation tracking QA development in the region. This study also contributes to global debates on QA in higher education by both echoing widespread tensions and advancing understanding of how these tensions demonstrate with a centralised governance context.

The study offers recommendations to enhance QA implementation at both policy and institutional levels. It advocates operational principles, including inclusivity in policy development, responsiveness to disciplinary diversity, transparency in expectations and processes, and trust-based rather than surveillance-oriented approaches. Underpinning these principles is the need for flexibility, autonomy and academic freedom in teaching and professional development, allowing academics to innovate pedagogically, make context-appropriate decisions and engage in meaningful professional growth rather than conforming to QA requirements and surveillance-based performance management.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CASs	Colleges of Applied Sciences
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
CoTs	Colleges of Technology
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
INQAAHE	The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	The Institutional Quality Audit
ISA	The Institutional Standards Assessment
ISAA	The Institutional Standards Assessment Application
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOHERI	The Ministry of Higher Education, Research & Innovation
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAAAQA	Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education
OAQHE	Oman Association for Quality in Higher Education
OQF	Oman Qualifications Framework
OQN	Oman Quality Network
QA	Quality Assurance
ROSQA	Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance
SET	Student Evaluations of Teaching
TNA	Training Needs Analysis
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UTAS	University of Technology and Applied Sciences

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Academic Department	Within each university branch, the academic department functions as a representative college of a broader academic area, including multiple specialisations within that field.
Academic Staff	All full-time teaching personnel who are directly involved in delivering academic programmes, supervising students, and contributing to the QA system. This group includes lecturers, senior lecturers and assistant professors.
Affirmation	An affirmation is a statement by the review panel recognising that the institution has identified an area for improvement and is already taking steps to address it.
Assistant Vice Chancellor	The Assistant Vice Chancellor is the senior academic and administrative leader of a university branch.
Commendation	A commendation is a formal acknowledgement of good practice or exceptional performance by the institution in a particular area that goes beyond the minimum requirements of the quality standards.
External Audit	An independent evaluation process conducted by the Omani quality assurance authority to assess a university's quality assurance with the aim of ensuring accountability and promoting improvement in alignment with national quality assurance requirements.
Head of Department	A senior academic staff leads a specific academic department (e.g., Engineering, Business) within a university branch.
Head of Section	A senior academic staff manages a specific subject area or academic unit within an academic department (e.g., Mechanical Engineering within the Engineering Department).
Higher Education	Higher education, also known as tertiary or post-secondary education, is the level of education that follows the completion of secondary schooling. It is delivered by universities, colleges, and other accredited institutions, and typically leads to qualifications such as diplomas, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorates. In Oman, this is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MOHERI) and quality-assured by the entity Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of

	Education (OAAAQA), which operates under the supervision of MOHERI.
Indicator	A specific, measurable, or observable element that provides evidence or insight into the extent to which a standard is being met. It serves as a tool to assess, monitor, or evaluate compliance, performance, or progress against defined criteria within a given framework.
Internal Audit	An independent evaluation process conducted within a university or higher education institution to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of its quality assurance system, academic processes, and administrative operations.
QA criterion	A more specific element or condition used to assess whether an institution is meeting a given standard. Criteria break down the standard into assessable components, providing clarity and guidance for both self-assessment and external evaluation.
QA standard	A broad, overarching statement that defines an expected level of performance, quality, or achievement that a higher education institution must meet in a specific area (e.g., governance, teaching quality, research, student support).
Recommendation	A formal statement made by an external review panel indicating an area where the institution does not fully meet the required standard or where improvement is needed. It is expected that the institution will take action to address the issue within a specific timeframe.
Student-centred learning	An educational approach that focuses on students' needs and learning styles, using teaching methods to actively engage them. It supports students in developing as independent learners, studying their chosen fields in depth, making connections across the curriculum, and enhancing their analytical, critical, and creative thinking skills.
The Institutional Standards Assessment Application (ISAA)	A summative process designed to determine whether an HEI meets the applicable national standards and criteria.
University Branch	A geographically located campus that functions as an integral part of the University, offering academic programmes, student services, and administrative operations under unified governance in alignment with the university's unified strategic plan, systems and policies.

CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE SCENE

The choice of area or topic can relate to a number of things, such as previous interests or concerns, or even elements deep in the biography of the researcher.

—Adrian Holliday, *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the scene for my research by presenting the motivations that that prompted me to investigate the impact of the QA system in Omani higher education at the university where I am based. Recognising that implementing quality assurance (QA) in higher education is not straightforward, especially in a developing country like the Sultanate of Oman, this chapter briefly addresses the research problem and focus. It also offers a brief overview of research delimitations which define the boundaries within which the research was conducted and clarify what the study does and does not claim to address. This is followed by the research questions guiding this research and highlights the significance of the study. Finally, it outlines the overall structure of the thesis.

1.2 Research motives

My motivation to study QA in higher education in Oman stems from my field experience. Over the past decade, my academic career has been a journey of growth, challenges, and discovery. As Holliday (2007) noted, research and professional practice are not always separate domains, for many researchers, they merge with daily work serving as the driver from which research questions emerge. This is reflected in my own dual role at the university where I work as an academic staff member engaged in teaching, while also functioning as a QA practitioner overseeing QA processes and practices. In mid-2015, I started as an English lecturer, fully immersed in the art of teaching. Teaching was my passion, and I was committed to providing my students with the best possible experience. As the years went on, my responsibilities expanded. I moved from being a lecturer to taking on roles such as a student committee coordinator and a course coordinator. These roles broadened my perspective on academic work. However, amidst all this, I noticed something else, a more pervasive influence shaping my work: quality assurance. Initially, QA seemed like a distant framework, something discussed in meetings and recorded in policy documents. Yet as I settled into my roles, it became evident that QA was affecting nearly every aspect of my academic life.

As an English lecturer, I participated in various QA tasks at the institutional level. My first real experience with QA processes occurred when I was involved in the team responsible for preparing the General Foundation Programme Quality Audit. I attended several awareness workshops and sessions conducted by the Oman QA authority as well as by the university management, which at the time managed the Colleges of Technology (CoTs). This realisation sparked a deeper curiosity. I began to ask questions: What role does QA play in shaping our teaching practices? How does QA affect stakeholders' time and workload? Are QA processes supportive tools or administrative burdens?

In 2019, I was appointed head of the QA department at Shinas College of Technology, where I began my academic career and which is now part of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). Most of the QA members, including myself, who were appointed as heads of the QA departments at CoTs were academic staff with no specialised training in QA. However, we gradually gained the knowledge and skills needed to manage QA tasks. My three years of experience in QA sparked my interest in exploring QA aspects further. Initially, I felt frustrated; QA seemed to add a layer of bureaucracy that drained my time and energy. I realised that QA is not an easy task, and I felt a significant burden was placed on my shoulders. These challenges motivated me to spend hours reading online about QA requirements, duties, responsibilities, and skills to improve my knowledge and understanding. I also attended various face-to-face and online national and international workshops and seminars, all of which highlighted the importance of fostering a culture of QA and implementing QA processes and practices. As I navigated the QA system, I began to wonder whether QA might offer benefits I was not yet seeing. Could it deliver value beyond mere compliance?

Following the establishment of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in 2020, I was involved in two university-level committees and assigned responsibility for policy development. These committees worked in line with the QA requirements to align with the established national QA system. I vividly recalled one meeting where the team was reviewing the policies, and someone remarked, "We just need to ensure this satisfies the QA requirements." That moment struck me. It felt as though QA was steering us, rather than us using QA as a tool to foster meaningful progress. This was a pivotal moment for me. Being closely engaged with decision-makers at the top levels of management gave me a new perspective. I was no longer just a lecturer or coordinator; I was now part of the system responsible for shaping and implementing QA policies across the university. It was both a privilege and a challenge, and it opened my eyes to the inner workings of the QA system in ways I had not experienced before.

Accordingly, I was motivated to examine QA in higher education within the context of Oman, which became the focus of my PhD research. I seek to gain a deeper understanding of how QA impacts the lives of academics. I cannot deny that participating at the management level helped me identify multiple challenges faced by various stakeholders in implementing QA frameworks. However, my questions became more pointed. What was QA trying to achieve? Was it fostering meaningful changes in academic work, or merely functioning as a system of checks? Furthermore, and most importantly, how does the QA system affect the academics who play a central role in higher education?

It is also worth mentioning that Oman's current vision encouraged me to explore QA in higher education as a research pathway. As discussed in Chapter 2, Oman like many other developing countries, has made efforts to develop QA frameworks and implement QA processes over the last two decades. To meet internal standards and enable its universities to be more competitive in the World University Rankings, the government established educational indicators in its Vision 2040 document (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2020). For example, four Omani universities are expected to rank among the top 300 universities in the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings by 2040 (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2020). This indicator can be considered an external force driving changes in the QA system of Omani higher education institutions (HEIs).

This introduction briefly outlines my motives and positionality, shaped by various experiences with QA implementation. These layered experiences, from both leadership and practitioner perspectives, influence how I approach this research. Through my work, I aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice. I seek to understand how academics experience QA implementation in their daily work, including both the benefits they perceive and the challenges they face in balancing QA requirements with their professional duties.

1.3 Research problem

My observations of frustration with QA implementation were not isolated experiences but echoed and reflected in ongoing research debates documented across different global contexts (e.g. Comber & Lorraine, 2010; Harvey, 2024c; Newton, 2000, 2002b; Williams, 2025). Comber and Lorraine (2010) argued that institutional responses to QA requirements tend to emerge incrementally and pragmatically, shaped by uncertain external demands and shifting internal power structures, a process they characterised as "muddling through" (p. 232). Williams (2025), in his recent editorial, underlined the tensions and uneasy relationships in quality management in higher education and showed how this issue remains unresolved and continues to generate academic debates.

Oman's transition from an expansion-focused to a quality-focused higher education strategy results in the creation of a national regulatory system, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. As Carroll and Palermo (2006) warned, "the introduction of a new national regulatory system to a developing country is doomed to failure unless it is accompanied by a corresponding commitment to raising the capability of that sector" (p. 11). This raises concerns about whether HEIs in Oman are sufficiently prepared to engage with QA beyond procedural compliance. Furthermore, Oman's monarchist and hierarchical social system, where influential elites often own private higher education institutions, creates tensions that can weaken regulatory enforcement and hinder open dialogue about quality improvement (Carroll & Palermo, 2006). Such embedded contextual challenges make it particularly important to investigate how QA is understood, experienced, and implemented within the Omani higher education system.

Studies across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, including Oman, reveal that QA frameworks have become central to higher education policies (Dowling & Almansoori, 2017; Magd & Karyamsetty, 2022). In their 2017 International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) presentation entitled "Quality assurance in the GCC – Challenges for the next decades," Dowling and Almansoori (2017) highlighted those persistent concerns regarding the superficial implementation of QA in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) HEIs. Based on reports from the Oman and Bahrain QA authorities, Dowling and Almansoori (2017) demonstrated that many HEIs developed QA mechanisms to ensure compliance with external requirements, rather than to foster meaningful internal quality improvement. Their discussion also indicated that several policies and procedures were developed to prepare for audits or reviews, reflecting a reactive, procedural approach to governance. While initial compliance may yield short-term improvements, especially in underperforming institutions, Dowling and Almansoori (2017) stressed that these improvements are limited in scope.

Before taking on the role of head of QA department at my college, I entered higher education as a lecturer with the assumption that Oman's QA system was a mature, seamlessly integrated framework, established, refined, and embedded in institutional culture. Given that the system had been formally in place since the early 2000s, I expected that academic staff would have long since adapted to it, incorporating QA practices into their routines. However, my later experiences in a leadership role revealed a more complex and fragmented reality. Despite years of implementation, tensions around QA persisted, often manifesting as subtle resistance, hesitant remarks in meetings, reluctance to engage with QA tasks, and a general lack of ownership. This disconnect between policy and practice became a central concern, prompting deeper inquiry into how QA is truly understood and enacted within Omani HEIs.

One instance that stands out was when some academics were tasked with preparing and writing the Institutional Standards Assessment Application (ISAA) for Shinas College of Technology. The standards, outlined in OAAA (2016), were distributed to the academic staff, and some staff members were designated as team leaders. While many acquiesced to their roles, it became clear that the process was far from smooth. Beneath the surface, there was confusion, frustration, and a sense of disconnect. Some staff members showed noticeable resistance and reluctance to engage in the task. Generally, they expressed concern that they were unaware of the requirements and how to complete the task. They also mentioned that they did not have sufficient time to finish it. At that moment, this implicit resistance showed that the QA policies and practices, established by the QA governing body, appeared to be an additional burden on the institution and its staff, creating conflicting demands.

Numerous studies have examined academics' perceptions of implementing QA systems across various contexts, including both Western and Eastern regions and both developed and developing countries. These are well-documented in a series of recent edited volumes and editorial overviews by Harvey (2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c), which synthesise findings from a range of international studies. Lee Harvey, a pioneering researcher and former editor in the field of QA, plays an initial role in shaping academic discourse on QA in higher education. As Williams (2025) light-heartedly noted, Harvey was once called the "Father of Quality", a title that still highlights the profound and permanent influence of his work in the field, which is referenced throughout the thesis (p. 1). Harvey's seminal publications (e. g., Harvey & Green, 1993) established the cornerstone conceptualisations of quality upon which much of the subsequent literature has been built.

Lee Harvey emphasised the central role of academic staff in determining the success or failure of QA system. Academic staff have historically been central to QA research, due to their vital role in enacting and negotiating QA processes (Harvey, 2024b). However, Harvey (2024c) explained:

> It is a shame that academic staff have simply complied with the quality assurance monstrosity. They may be adjusting quality assurance by their engagement with it but that is only nibbling away at the edges while the monster gobbles up their autonomy and academic freedom. Quality assurance has gone way beyond personal affront or surveillance and has become an instrument of policy that constrains and controls the once-bastion of enquiry, freedom of thought and fundamental critique.

While some studies explore these tensions, further research is needed to understand how academics navigate the pressures of QA that increasingly constrain enquiry, academic freedom, and the core values of higher education within the context of Oman. In Oman, research on the implementation of QA systems in higher education remains quite limited. The existing literature, mainly produced by experts affiliated with the Omani QA authority, tends to emphasise the development of the QA system and its importance in improving the quality of education within HEIs (e.g. Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll, et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008; Razvi et al., 2012; Razvi & Carroll, 2007). Despite the extensive implementation of the QA system in Oman's HEIs over the past two decades, there remains little understanding of how academics, the key stakeholders responsible for enacting policies, experience, interpret and respond to these requirements in daily academic work, a gap that may undermine the system's ability to achieve its intended goals of educational improvement.

Alshahri (2014) and Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020), both mixed-method studies, represented notable contributions to understanding the impacts of QA on academic staff. Alshahri's (2014) PhD thesis is particularly relevant as it explored staff views of the QA system within the same context as my study, the CoTs, using both quantitative and qualitative questions (six open-ended questions) within the questionnaire. Her research offered early insights by applying cross-tabulation analysis to responses from 670 academics, 149 trainers/technicians, and 70 administrators, examining differences in their views on the implementation of the QA system across CoTs in Oman. Alshahri (2014) identified both positive and negative impacts of the QA policy on stakeholders, emphasising that staff empowerment is essential for enhancing participation and fostering a sense of ownership over QA processes and practices.

Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study, comprising seven interviews with academic faculty and a questionnaire distributed to 154 teachers, to investigate the impact of QA practices on teaching quality at Rustaq College of Education, now part of UTAS. Examining the relationship between QA processes and teaching performance, professional development, and monitoring mechanisms, the study revealed that the QA measures had no significant impact on teaching quality. Furthermore, the findings indicated that teachers were largely dissatisfied with the top-down evaluation mechanisms imposed upon them, perceiving these processes as externally driven rather than reflective of their professional realities. Accordingly, the Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020) called for further research that positions teachers as the driving force behind identifying their own quality teaching needs and directing their own professional development.

However, the changing landscape of QA in Oman over the past decade, since Alshahri's study, along with the growing adoption of best practices and accumulated experience, necessitates further investigation. While both studies employed mixed-methods, Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020) included only seven interviews compared to 18 semi-structured interviews in my research. The use of an in-depth qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which academics experience and make sense of QA requirements in their academic work.

1.4 Research focus

This study focuses on the QA processes, policies, and practices implemented at UTAS to meet the requirements of the national QA system in Oman. The study primarily focuses on the institutional QA standards that have been in place since the implementation of the QA system within the Sultanate of Oman (which can be used interchangeably with Oman throughout this thesis) and continue to guide practices within HEIs. While the Oman Qualification Framework (OQF) and Programme Standards Assessment are influencing the ongoing development of the QA system, this study does not explore these two in depth, as they are currently in the implementation phase and have not yet been fully implemented. UTAS is still not nationally accredited; however, all UTAS branches, previously operating as Colleges of Technology (CoTs) and Colleges of Applied Sciences (CASs), completed the first stage of the QA audit. Further details about this process are provided in Chapter 3. Although research has gained increasing attention in recent years and has been incorporated into the university's strategic planning, UTAS remains primarily a teaching-focused institution. Therefore, this study does not examine research activities but instead focuses on how QA processes emphasise teaching practices and how these practices support academics in fulfilling their core responsibilities.

This research aims to explore academics' perceptions of the implementation of the QA system and their involvement in policy development, teaching quality, and other internal QA activities within the university. The study explores how the QA system influences academics' work through institutional policies governing teaching quality including those related to examinations, assessment, academic integrity, and pedagogical approaches while examining key QA-driven practices within curriculum design and review, and the provision of teaching and learning resources, as outlined in the national QA institutional standards. It also assesses how professional development opportunities and performance appraisal processes, including staff evaluations, classroom observations, and student feedback, impact and shape academics' teaching practices and overall academic work in response to QA requirements.

1.5 Research delimitations

This study is subject to several delimitations that define its scope. Firstly, the research is limited to the QA system within a single public university in Oman. Secondly, the study focuses exclusively on academic staff perspectives, thoughtfully excluding administrators, QA officers, policy makers and students to reflect the research aim of understanding those directly responsible for enacting QA in their teaching. While other stakeholder perspectives are valuable, academics engage a crucial position as both subjects and implementers of QA, making their perspectives particularly helpful for understanding any policy-practice gaps. Thirdly, the study focuses on understanding how QA processes, policies, and practices shape academic work by exploring perceptions and lived experiences rather than assessing the effectiveness of the QA system itself. The emphasis on subjective experience is intentional, reflecting interpretivist epistemological stance through academics' interpretations, responses, and adaptations to QA requirements.

Finally, the study is delimited by its focus on the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) framework as the primary reference point for examining the QA system. The framework, mandated by Omani QA authority, represents the overarching quality framework governing HEIs in Oman and constitutes the most significant QA impact on academics' work. By focusing specifically on the framework, this research examines in depth how the external audit, conducted as a centrally regulated process through which the Omani QA authority evaluates HEIs against national standards, shapes academic work. The external audit process is particularly significant in this context, as it constitutes the primary process through which QA requirements are formally enforced, compelling HEIs and their academics to align their practices with the standards. This cyclical process of institutional scrutiny and accountability directly structures how academics engage with teaching, professional development, and performance evaluation, making it the most consequential QA-related process in academics' professional lives. While academics may engage with other quality-related processes, such as listing and alignment process in relation to OQF, academic programme evaluation and internal audits, the ISA framework provides the overarching standards, procedures, and requirements that most directly structure academics' QA experiences and shape their academic work. Where participants reference such additional quality-related activities during interviews, these will be acknowledged and considered where they offer relevant insights into teaching and academic work.

1.6 Research questions

Considering the research motives, the identified problem, and the study's focus, the overarching research question for this research is:

How do QA processes, policies and practices shape academic work in higher education?

Specifically, the research aims to answer this overarching question through the following sub-questions:

- How do academic staff define and conceptualise QA in higher education?
- How do academic staff perceive and experience the implementation of QA processes, policies and practices within the university?
- How do academics perceive the impact of QA processes, policies and practices on their teaching, professional development, and performance evaluation?
- What benefits and challenges do academics encounter in assuring teaching quality within a centrally regulated national QA system?

1.7 Significance of the study

This research is significant at multiple levels, contributing academic understanding of QA in higher education and providing practical insights that may inform the development and improvement of QA system in Oman. Although extensive research has examined academic staff, this study advances the discourse by positioning academics as active interpreters and negotiators of QA demands rather than passive recipients of QA systems. In doing so, it offers more insights into the complex and intertwined relationship between policy and practice. Moreover, the study addresses a significant gap in QA research, which has been developed primarily in Western contexts

(Harvey, 2024c; Harvey & Williams, 2010b, 2010a; Williams, 2025). By examining QA implementation in Oman, a non-Western setting with a centralised governance system, cultural values and institutional structures, this research reveals how international QA models operate when transferred to different contexts.

Despite two decades of widespread QA implementation across GCC higher education systems, research exploring academics' perspectives remains limited. This study helps fill this gap by providing detailed empirical evidence of how academics in Oman perceive and experience QA system. It examines not only their perceptions towards QA but also the specific ways in which QA shapes their academic work and how it impacts on their teaching, pedagogical decision-making, administrative workload, professional autonomy and managerial relationships. Moreover, focusing on the UTAS, the largest public university by student number, branches, and technical education, the study offers context-specific insights into QA implementation. Findings have significance beyond Oman, enabling comparative analyses in similar institutional and regional settings across the GCC and other developing higher education systems.

The study's findings would have direct practical implications for improving QA implementation. Understanding how academics experience QA, what they find valuable, what creates unnecessary burdens, and where conflicts arise between compliance and professional judgment provides essential knowledge for designing a more effective, academically responsive QA system. By pinpointing the specific challenges academics face, whether related to understanding QA standards, managing documentation requirements, or balancing QA with other duties, HEIs can enhance the QA process, enabling academics to engage more effectively and less stressfully with QA procedures, policies, and practices. Furthermore, this research offers a foundation for more constructive discussions among policymakers, institutional management, and academics on how to achieve QA goals while considering professional expertise and academic autonomy.

For policymakers responsible for the national QA frameworks, this research provides evidence-based insights essential for policy development and refinement. The Omani QA authority needs to understand not only if HEIs comply with QA requirements but also how these requirements affect academic work. By exploring where QA processes and policies support academic work and where they create counterproductive burdens, the study can assist policymakers to balance external accountability with professional autonomy. As Oman works towards its Vision 2040 goals to develop a knowledge-based economy, the quality and effectiveness of higher education become increasingly vital. Therefore, understanding how the current QA system impacts academics is crucial in ensuring QA practices support rather than hinder the educational excellence necessary for national development objectives.

Finally, this research provides a basis for future research. By exploring academics' perspectives on the QA system in Oman, the study offers foundational knowledge that can support long-term research to track how these perspectives change over time, comparative studies across HEIs or different national contexts, and intervention research to test practices aimed at improving QA implementation.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

This thesis comprises nine chapters, each contributing a layer of interpretation and collectively shaping a cohesive understanding of the research. The chapters are structured as follows:

Chapter 1 sets the scene for this research by providing the study's background. It begins with an explanation of the research motives, the research problem, and the research focus, followed by the research focus and delimitations. It also presents the research questions and the significance of the study. This chapter also outlines the overall structure of the thesis. While this chapter offers an introduction to the research context and focus, a more detailed discussion is presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

Chapter 2 traces the journey of higher education in Oman, highlighting its key stages and phases of development. It begins with the emergence of HEIs and proceeds through the establishment of the national QA system, which is central to this research. The chapter examines the development of policies, the design of the Omani QA system, the creation of standards, and the institutional accreditation process.

Chapter 3 focuses on the university context, tracing its development from historical origins to its existing structure and practices. The university selected for this research has undergone significant changes, many of which unfolded during my PhD journey. This chapter outlines key institutional milestones and describes the governance and management structures that shape university operations. Particular attention is given to the development of the QA system within the university, from its initial implementation upon the introduction of QA in Oman to its current state, providing a contextual background for understanding the institutional mechanisms that underpin this study.

Chapter 4 offers insights through the literature, exploring the conceptualisation of quality and QA in higher education. It examines what QA seeks to achieve in practice globally, including accountability, control, compliance, and improvement. It then explores the outcomes and challenges of QA implementation in the MENA region, with a specific focus on the GCC context, where tensions between imported models and local realities remain a central concern. The chapter concludes with remarks that connect these topics to the broader focus of this study.

Chapter 5 presents the research design and methodology, describing the ontological and epistemological bases that guide the study. It explains the qualitative research approach used to explore academics' perspectives on the implementation of QA system. The chapter outlines the data collection methods, emphasising participant selection and the research site. It further discusses the process of thematic analysis, which is employed to identify and interpret key themes within the data, as well as the role of reflexivity in shaping the interpretation of the findings. The chapter also addresses ethical considerations to ensure the research adheres to these considerations.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the research findings. Chapter 6 explores participants' perceptions of the QA system, focusing on their engagement, involvement, and communication within it. It looks at how they define and interact with the system, focusing on their voices in the implementation process and their overall experiences with QA practices. Chapter 7 narrows the focus to examines how the system affects the professional and academic lives of academic staff, taking into account their dual roles as academics and QA practitioners. The chapter examines the system’s impact on key aspects of academic work, including teaching, professional development, and performance appraisal.

Chapter 8 synthesises the main insights emerging from the findings, highlighting the central themes and tensions that present throughout the study. It situates these findings within broader debates about the impact of QA systems on academic work in higher education, discussing their implications for understanding how a centrally regulated national QA system shape academics' professional practices, experiences, and responses within Oman's higher education context.

Chapter 9 concludes the research and its contributions. It summarises the main findings in response to the overarching research question, outlines the research contributions, acknowledges the study limitations, and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. This chapter concludes with reflections on the research process and its contribution to understanding QA from an academic perspective.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING THE OMANI CONTEXT

We devote great care and attention to the development and reform of education in Oman. Our aims include the raising of standards and updating the curriculum to make it richer and more relevant to the needs of an ever-changing world.

—Sultan Qaboos bin Said, *33rd UNESCO General Conference*

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background for the Omani higher education context. It offers an overview of the Sultanate of Oman, including the development of education and the higher education sector. It highlights the geographical, economic, historical and political factors that have shaped higher education and the subsequent establishment of the quality assurance (QA) system. It also details the establishment of a national QA system in Oman and the key milestones of the current system. Understanding this contextual background is essential to recognising the drivers, challenges, and outcomes of implementing the QA system within the Omani context. Given the multiple abbreviations used throughout this chapter, key terms are written in full more than once to ensure clarity.

2.2 Overview of the Sultanate of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is a developing nation in the Middle East, situated on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula and holds significant geopolitical importance in the Gulf region. Oman shares borders with the United Arab Emirates to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west, and Yemen to the southwest, with a long coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman (see Figure 1). Its strategic position near the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial global oil transit route, has historically given Oman considerable geopolitical significance. Oman is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes six other countries: the Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The GCC seeks to promote coordination, integration and connectivity across all sectors among its member nations (Dowling & Almansoori, 2017). Within higher education, the GCC region collaborates by adopting Western practices and promotes integration and internalisation across member states.

Oman is divided into 11 governorates, each with its own distinctive administrative, geographical, and economic significance: Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Dhahirah, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South, and Al Wusta as shown in Figure 1. These governorates include a total of 63 regions or wilayats. The country's total population exceeds five million, with

Omani nationals making up approximately 56% (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025a). The remaining 44% consists of expatriates from various countries, mainly from South Asia and other Arab nations. This multicultural composition has contributed to Oman's workforce and societal growth. Foreign expertise and labour, particularly from countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania, have played a role in driving the country's modernisation and development (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025a).

Figure 1

Geographical Context of Oman within the GCC

Note. Maps sourced from Freepik Premium resources and adapted to include country and governorate names. These maps may not accurately reflect official political borders.

Economically, Oman's transformation began with the discovery of oil in the 1960s, which became the cornerstone of its development. The revenues generated from crude oil and natural gas exports, which historically account for over 70% of the nation's income, have enabled significant investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Al-Issa & Al-Najjar, 2022). In recent years, Oman has focused on diversifying its economy, as indicated in Vision 2040, aiming to reduce its reliance on oil by promoting sectors like tourism, logistics, fisheries, and renewable energy (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2020).

Politically and historically, Oman is one of the oldest independent states in the GCC. Its governance is rooted in an absolutist monarchy led by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, who succeeded Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 2020. Sultan Qaboos, who ruled from 1970 to 2020, is credited with modernising Oman and fostering stability through a blend of traditional and modern governance (Al-Issa & Al-Najjar, 2022). Oman is also considered an autocracy, with the Sultan holding supreme power and serving as both the Head of Government (Prime Minister) and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. He also directly oversees key ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Finance. These ministries are supported by officials titled "Ministers Responsible For" specific policy areas (Alhaj, 2000). As noted by Alhaj (2000), Oman functions as an autocratic state, with the Sultan maintaining complete control over major domestic and international affairs. Unlike Western democracies, Oman lacks formal democratic institutions or political parties, and political participation occurs within a framework defined by the monarchy rather than through competitive electoral processes. However, the country's foreign policy is renowned for its neutrality and diplomacy, often serving as a mediator in regional and global conflicts.

The historical relationships with Britain and the United States have deeply influenced Oman's political and economic landscape. Al-Issa and Al-Najjar (2022) highlighted the continuing influence of Britain in Oman:

> Historically, the British presence in Oman can be dated to the 18th century. Oman was a British protectorate during the 19th century. As an underdeveloped state, Oman was dependent on British loans for over eight decades, which helped the British government to maintain vast administrative control over the Sultanate. The British also played a major role in bringing Sultan Qaboos to the throne in 1970, which created a powerful and unbreakable bond between the two countries and has given Britain a preferred position among foreign countries. (p. 49)

The United States became a key ally of Oman in the 1970s, offering both economic and military support aligned with its broader strategic interests in the Middle East. Al-Issa and Al-Najjar (2022) also highlighted the growing United States influence in Oman during this period:

> Americans decided to stretch a financial hand (USD$300 million) to Sultan Qaboos in the form of economic as well as military assistance. This helped a small country like Oman with a pragmatic and modern government to achieve survival and sovereignty through acquiring a strategic ally and great-power patron or protector. It further helped the Americans to secure strategic allies and maintain regional stability and supremacy over a very rich oil-producing region with a pivotal position and strategic location. (p. 49)

Both Britain and the United States have contributed to shaping Oman's development, with their influence extending across various sectors, including education. For example, the adoption of international standards in Oman's education system, such as affiliations and accreditation with foreign institutions, which is discussed later, reflects the lasting impact of these relationships. The incorporation of English as a medium of instruction and the establishment of programmes based on Western educational frameworks further demonstrate this influence. In summary, Oman's strategic location, economic reliance on oil, historical ties with Britain and the United States, and its modern political framework have collectively shaped its identity and route.

2.3 The educational evolution in Oman

Education has been central to Oman's national development strategy since the renaissance in 1970. Figure 2 briefly presents the four-stage development of the school education system from establishing foundation access to today's emphasis on quality accreditation. The success of school education expansion paved the way for the emergence of higher education institutions (HEIs).

2.4 Emergence of higher education institutions

The higher education system in Oman is relatively young, having begun in the 1980s. As shown in Figure 3, this gradual expansion reflects a series of significant milestones that have collectively shaped the current landscape of higher education in Oman (Al Nabhani, 2007; Allen & Rigsbee, 2000; Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation, 2025a). Currently, there are eight public and 25 private HEIs, including universities, colleges, and institutes, operating across the country (Ministry of Higher Education Research and Innovation [MOHERI], 2025). The rapid growth of private higher education in Oman necessitated a regulatory response to ensure quality and oversight across the expanding sector. In its early stages, the expansion of private higher education was managed through regulatory policies, beginning with Royal Decrees No. 41/99 and 42/99 and Ministerial Decision No. 36/99 (Alsaadi et al., 2025). To support this growing sector, MOHERI provided private HEIs with various forms of support, including internal scholarships, funding for research and publications, and faculty development initiatives. A significant turning point in higher education policy came in 2000, when Oman joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Alsaadi et al., 2025). This transition brought increased influence from international organisations, including the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and played increasingly prominent roles in shaping the national reform agenda due to internationalisation demands, as explored in detail later. Private HEIs grew rapidly, forming diverse affiliations with universities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, Asia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe and Australia through franchised programme options (Alsaadi et al., 2025; Ross & Trevor-Roper, 2015). This diversity in partnerships, while enriching the educational sector, emerged as a significant factor necessitating the establishment of a national QA system.

2.5 Establishment of a national quality management system

The establishment of a national QA system in Oman has progressed through a number of development stages. Its development involves ongoing consultation with local and international experts and benchmarking against international QA models. Over time, the QA authority revises its frameworks and policies, drawing on the collaborative contributions of internationally and locally appointed specialists engaged by the QA authority. These experts provided guidance and support over extended periods to develop and improve the QA system (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll, et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008; Razvi et al., 2012; Razvi & Carroll, 2007; Trevor-Roper et al., 2013).

Figure 2

Development of the School Education System in Oman

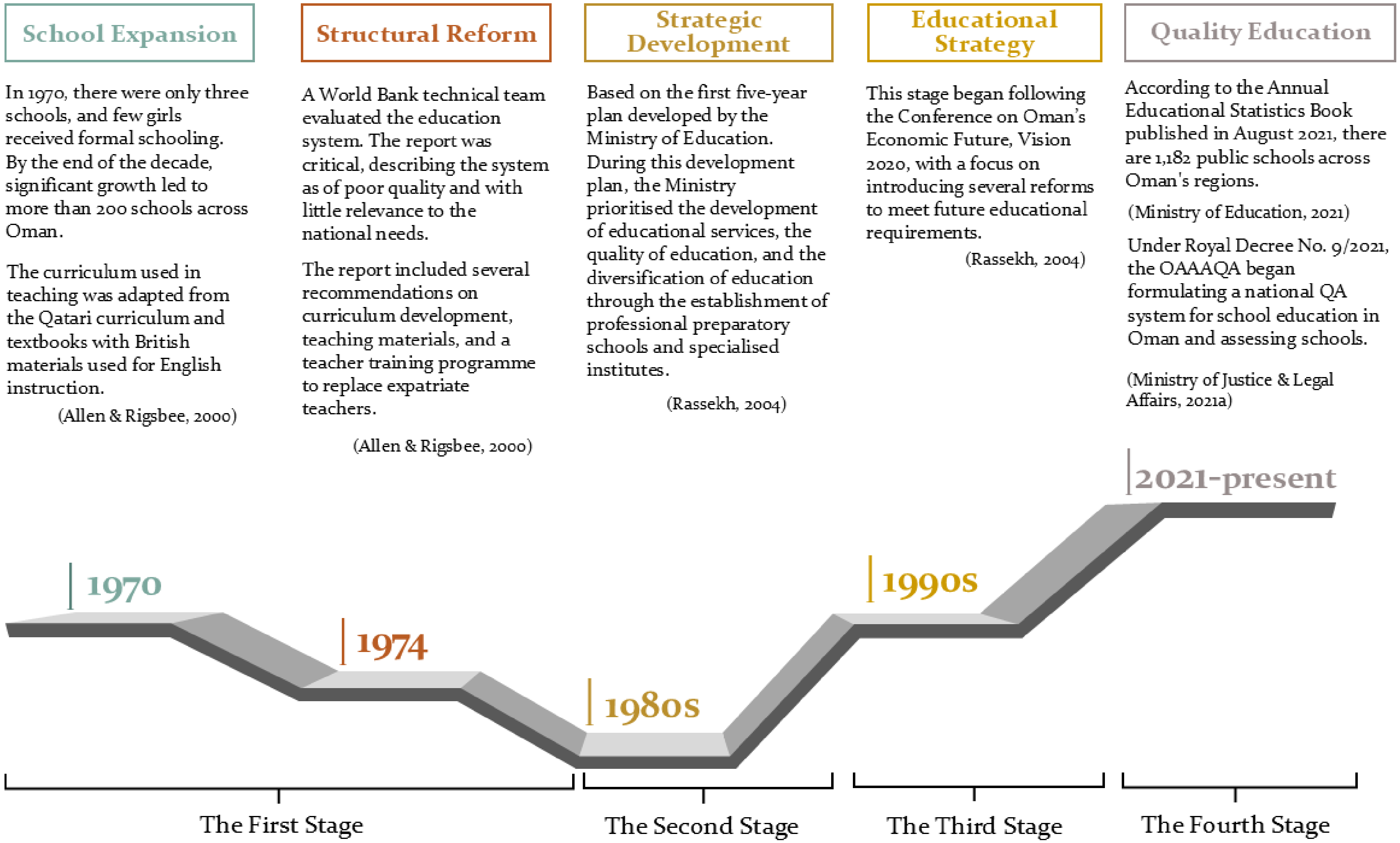
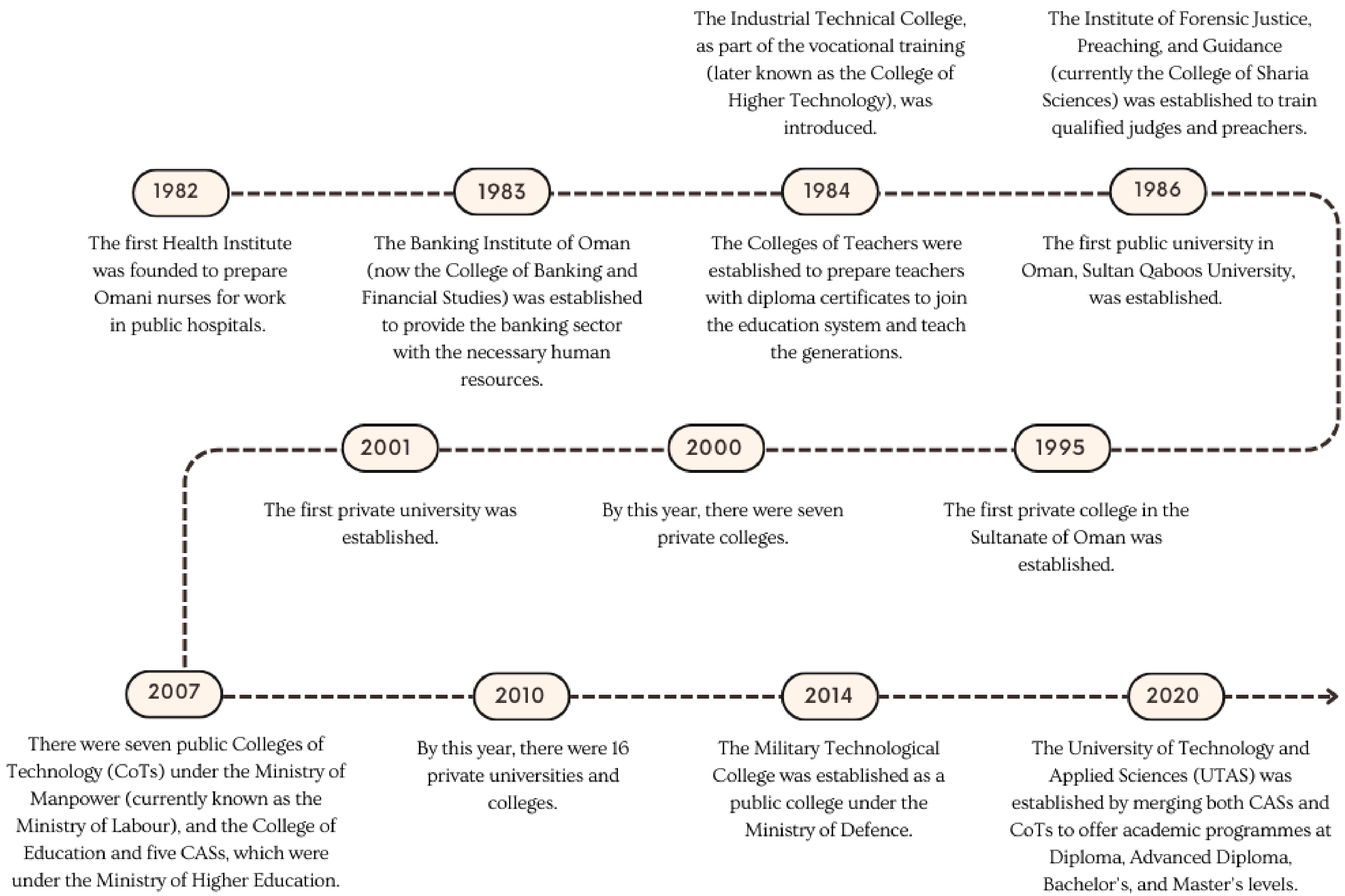


Figure 3

Timeline of the Gradual Expansion of HEIs in Oman



As such, this section presents the key drivers behind the development of Oman's national QA system, as well as its implementation, by drawing on documents from the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), expert consultancy publications, and existing literature on QA in Oman and the GCC region.

2.5.1 Drivers behind the development of the Omani QA system

A combination of internal priorities and external pressures influenced the development of the QA system in Oman, including rapid expansion of higher education, governmental funding, regional and international trends, foreign scholarship programmes, international organisations' demands and global university rankings. Internally, the rapid expansion of higher education in Oman, particularly the significant growth of the private sector created an urgent demand for quality oversight and emerged as a key internal driver behind the development of a national QA system (Al’Abri, 2016; Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008; Ismail & Al Shanfari, 2014; Khuram & Shaukat, 2021; Omboosuren & Gantogtokh, 2021). An early response to this demand was the affiliation policy introduced in the mid-1990s, which required all new private HEIs to establish formal partnerships with established institutions as a prerequisite for licensing (Al’Abri, 2016). These partnerships with international institutions typically required local HEIs to adopt all or part of the partner's academic systems, curricula, and academic standards (Cheng & Al Shukaili, 2022). While the affiliation policy served as an interim quality mechanism, it also revealed significant limitations, including inconsistency among different international partners and the absence of unified national standards, ultimately highlighting the need for a more structured and centralised QA framework.

In Oman, funding is identified another key driver of the QA system in higher education. The government remains the principal source of financial support, particularly for public HEIs (Segumpan, 2021). At the same time, it extends indirect support to private institutions primarily through land grants, tax exemptions, and government-funded internal scholarships that cover student tuition fees (Al Barwani & Osman, 2010; Al’abri, 2015). While the government is expected to continue offering financial assistance to all

HEIs as much as possible (AlKalbani & Touq, 2022), there are growing indications, based on recent fluctuations in student admissions data from the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC), that future funding may gradually be reduced. Therefore, a gradual shift toward decentralising financial control and diversifying funding sources, which is a strategic move to promote sustainability (AlKalbani & Touq, 2022). From a policy standpoint, this shift also pressures HEIs to seek local and international accreditation to attract alternative funding, international partnerships, research grants, and higher local and international student enrolment based on institutional reputation.

Regional and international trends played a crucial role in establishing Oman's QA system. During the 2000s, there was an obvious regional trend toward establishing QA bodies across the GCC, creating peer pressure and learning opportunities. As previously noted, international affiliations played a role in shaping policies on affiliation and accreditation, which emerged as strategic responses to growing national and global pressures. In the GCC region, most countries have public and private institutions that are gaining international accreditation or entering into agreements with international universities to make their courses more internationally recognised (Dowling & Almansoori, 2017; Vardhan, 2015). Vardhan (2015) explained that the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are among the top host countries for the "branch campus model". Other GCC countries follow the "the partnership model", with universities developing programmes affiliated with international HEIs such as Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Bahrain adopts a "twinning model," in which students study part of the programme in the host country and another part in their home country (p. 6). Dowling and Almansoori (2017) noted that the private higher education sector in almost all GCC countries is diversified, with limited national regulations governing these systems. The massification and internationalisation of private HEIs in the GCC countries drive the establishment of a QA system.

Foreign scholarship programmes, which enable a large number of Omani students to pursue higher education abroad, significantly contribute to the internationalisation of Oman's higher education system. These scholarships not only equip students with advanced qualifications but also expose them to global academic practices, diverse pedagogies, and international standards. As a result, returning graduates, many of whom now serve as academics or policymakers, brought with them insights and experiences that inform institutional development and QA practices (Al'abri, 2015). Furthermore, Oman's participation in regional and global higher education forums and conferences encouraged benchmarking practices and policy borrowing, which informed the structure and standards of the national QA framework.

International organisations are increasingly influential in shaping Oman's education policies, particularly in higher education. Entities such as the UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNICEF introduce global educational discourses like lifelong learning, the knowledge economy, technological integration, and English as a Second Language (ESL), which are integrated into Omani policy frameworks to respond to global demands (Al'abri, 2015). For instance, the Ministry of Education in Oman is required to submit regular progress reports on the development of Basic Education to UNESCO, reflecting the organisation's strong influence on national policy (Al'abri, 2015; UNESCO, 2018). UNESCO's collaboration with Oman is instrumental in aligning the country's education system with international standards. These collaborations reflect an increasing tendency of integrating global educational standards into Oman's national policies.

The rise of global university rankings significantly influenced the introduction of Oman's national QA system. Like other GCC countries, Oman aims to enhance its international profile (Al'abri, 2015; Segumpan & Abu Zahari, 2021). Oman Vision 2040 explicitly targets having at least four universities among the world's top 300 in QS rankings (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2020). Recent achievements include Sultan Qaboos University advancing 28 positions to 334th globally in QS World Rankings 2026 and four other Omani private HEIs appearing in the 2026 rankings. Therefore, the vision represents the most recent driver for enhancing the implementation of the QA system in Oman. It has placed persistent pressure on HEIs to secure both national and international accreditation, making QA a central priority. The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) faces intensified pressure as the largest public university in Oman, compelling it to compete with other HEIs and align closely with the national higher education goals.

These various drivers, including national ambitions for economic diversification, global competitiveness, and the need to regulate a growing higher education sector, provided the force for the development of Oman's national QA system. Understanding how these drivers translated into policy and institutional development requires a closer look at the progression of QA since its establishment. The following section explores this historical development in more depth.

2.5.2 Development and implementation of QA in Oman

The development of Oman's national QA system reflects a gradual, multi-phase progression, beginning with the introduction of the Oman Accreditation Council, and ending in the formalisation of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) and its transition to the OAAAQA.

2.5.2.1 Initial steps toward national QA system (2001–2005)

In 2001, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said established the Oman Accreditation Council through Royal Decree No. 74/2001, marking the creation of Oman's first national QA body for higher education (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2001). This placed Oman among the earliest GCC countries to establish a national QA system, following the UAE. This decree signalled a strong commitment to improving the quality of higher education in Oman, emphasising the importance of QA across HEIs. This focus on quality aligns with the broader national vision, as addressed earlier, that "we devote great care and attention to the development and reform of education in Oman. Our aims include the raising of standards and updating the curriculum to make it richer and more relevant to the needs of an ever-changing world" (Sultan Qaboos, 2005).

The council was entrusted with several responsibilities to lay the groundwork for the national QA system in higher education. During the initial phase, the council made efforts to raise sector-wide awareness of the importance of quality and accountability in higher education. This period focused on exploring and adapting international QA models to suit the local context, setting the foundation for future reforms. Early efforts included preliminary data collection and institutional reporting, which paved the way for more structured QA practices. The council also initiated the development of core frameworks and accreditation criteria for both institutions and academic programmes (Carroll et al., 2009).

QA policies in Oman were shaped within the broader context of globalisation and internationalisation. As noted in several practitioner-authored studies (Carroll, et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008; Razvi et al., 2012; Razvi & Carroll, 2007), these policies were informed by international benchmarking and consultations with global QA experts. Goodliffe and Razvi (2008) highlighted that Oman, like many other nations, faces the challenge of identifying and adopting quality assurance mechanisms and practices that are most appropriate for its national context. Nonetheless, within a globalising policy context, the council drew on the Good Practice Guidelines from the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) to guide the development of foundational QA infrastructure (see Appendix 1).

One of the key outputs of this phase was the publication of the Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA) in 2004 (Oman Accreditation Council, 2004). The ROSQA outlined the components of the national QA system, including the Classification of Institutions, the Institutional and Programme Accreditation Process, and the establishment of the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF). The ROSQA framework was inspired by international models, drawing on American structures for qualifications (Carroll, et al., 2009; Oman Accreditation Council, 2004). Through international benchmarking and evaluation of nearly 20 national frameworks, the Australian standard classification framework for educational fields was adopted for its robust structure. The Australian framework comprises three levels of classification: broad fields defined by theoretical frameworks and objectives, narrow fields organised by disciplinary focus and detailed fields differentiated by specific methodologies and tools (Carroll, et al., 2009). This framework was subsequently optimised through stakeholder consultations across the education sector and government ministries. This phase also included the creation of a bilingual glossary of quality-related terms to support consistent QA practices (Carroll et al., 2009). While elements of the system were introduced through ROSQA, others required refinement or further development, which occurred in subsequent years.

2.5.2.2 Formalisation and sector-wide engagement in QA system (2005–2010)

Between 2005 and 2010, the Omani QA system underwent significant reforms to its standards and processes, accompanied by national initiatives to build a quality culture across the higher education sector. These efforts included the establishment of the national quality plan, training programmes, and the creation of the Oman Quality Network (OQN), all of which were designed to promote awareness, enhance institutional capacity, and support the development of an internal QA system within HEIs (Al Barwani & Osman, 2010; Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). This reform direction was influenced, in part, by contributions from international consultants, particularly experts from New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom, who played a role in shaping the design and development of these frameworks (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008).

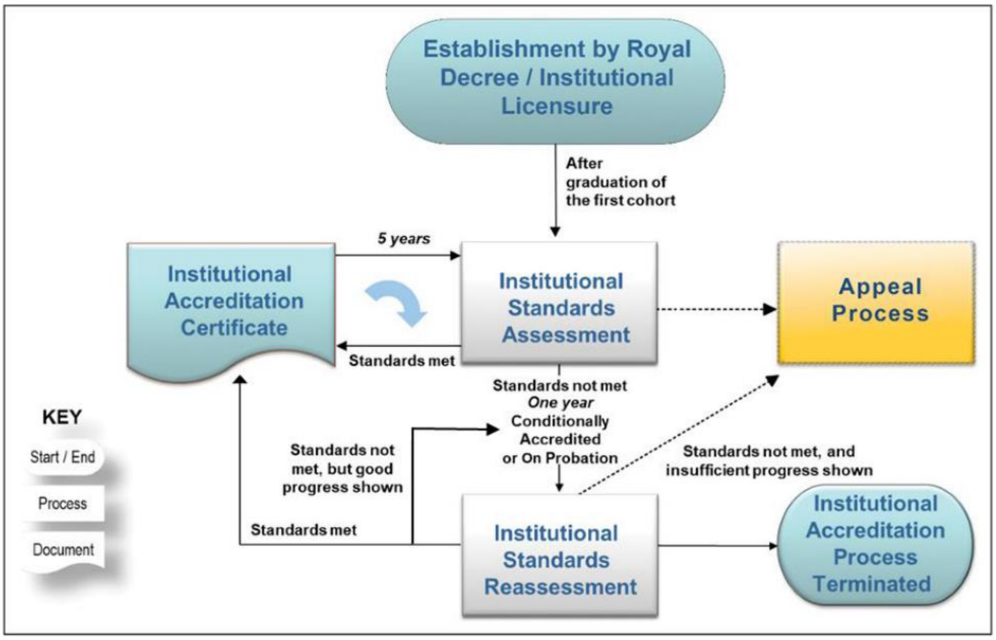
Revised Institutional Standards

Drawing on early feedback from the implementation of the ROSQA, which involved two institutions undergoing the accreditation process, it became evident that much of the higher education sector was not yet adequately prepared to fulfil accreditation requirements (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). Accordingly, the council decided to carry out a national needs analysis, which included a thorough review of ROSQA and other relevant regulations, consultations with the sector, and international benchmarking (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). Goodliffe and Razvi (2008) concluded that the institutional standards required revision to ensure they were more thorough and better suited to the Omani context. The framework underwent gradual revisions to create a more cohesive structure that aligns qualifications, fields of study, and academic credits. This alignment was designed to enable better compatibility between Oman's higher education system and those of leading international standards. The aim was to transition Oman from a system reliant on external models to a self-sustaining, internationally recognised provider of higher education (Al Barwani & Osman, 2010; Carroll et al., 2009).

As a result of this analysis, the new institutional accreditation framework consists of two stages: Quality Audit, and Standards Assessment, as shown in Figure 4. Quality audits enable HEIs to develop internal QA systems and align with international best practices (Carroll et al., 2009). Supported by the council Board and the Ministry of Higher Education, the quality audits, explained in detail below, also enhance public accountability. The council developed the Quality Audit Manual, incorporating sector feedback and international standards, which outlines audit procedures, self-study preparation, and guidelines for external reviewers (see Appendix 1). Workshops were held to introduce the Manual to the sector (Carroll et al., 2009; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). The Oman Accreditation Council's approach to quality audit was based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose' that focused on assessing the effectiveness of an institution's QA and evaluating quality processes and strategies aligned with the HEI's goals and objectives (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008). To maintain their accreditation status, accredited institutions are required to undergo an Institutional Standards Assessment every five years, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

An Overview of the Institutional Accreditation Process in Oman



Note. This is a screenshot taken from the publicly available document (OAAAQA, 2024a).

Quality audits

Quality audits in higher education begin with institutions conducting an internal review and submitting a self-evaluation report. This is followed by an independent assessment carried out by a team of external reviewers, which in Oman includes both national and international experts (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008; Kooli, 2019; Oman Accreditation Council, 2008). The evaluation process includes on-site visits, during which reviewers engage with a range of university stakeholders. Based on their findings, the review team produces a report that is typically made public, highlighting commendable practices and suggesting areas for improvement. Rather than assigning a score or outcome, the audit is designed as a formative exercise intended to guide improvement. The process is not about enforcing compliance but rather about encouraging thoughtful introspection and constructive change (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008). This approach has also been adopted in various contexts around the world, including New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Chile, since the early 1990s (Boswell et al., 2024; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008).

Between late 2007 and early 2008, the council conducted two pilot quality audits to test the overall audit process and gather meaningful input from participating institutions. Unlike the subsequent official audits, the outcomes of these pilots were kept confidential. The experience and lessons learned from the pilots played a role in refining the official audit procedures, which were formally launched in 2008. Early responses from involved institutions indicate that the process was both comprehensive and demanding. Some institutions had begun implementing recommendations from the pilot reports to strengthen their internal QA systems. To support nationwide introduction, a schedule was established to conduct quality audits across more than 60 HEIs over six years including CoTs and CASs (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008).

The national quality plan

In 2006, Carroll and Palermo (2006) discussed how the QA system was reviewed by external consultants, who conducted semi-structured visits to most private institutions and some public ones, with a focus mainly on private providers due to their greater variability. The aim was to assess their compliance with existing regulations, readiness for a more advanced QA system, and to gather general feedback. These site visits were supplemented by interviews with government representatives and staff, as well as an analysis of relevant documents (Carroll & Palermo, 2006). The outcome of this process was the drafting of the national quality plan for Oman, which was approved for consultation with the higher education sector and outlined a reform of the national QA system. This included 70 objectives grouped under 14 goals, with key priorities such as developing internationally benchmarked standards for institutional and programme approvals, streamlining licensing and accreditation processes, and introducing a recognition pathway for programmes already accredited abroad and subject to transnational QA mechanisms (Carroll & Palermo, 2006).

The Oman quality network

One of the goals in the national quality plan was to launch the Oman Quality Network (OQN), intended to strengthen collaboration and support the exchange of effective practices across HEIs (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll et al., 2009). Carroll and Palermo (2006) noted that comparable networking approaches proved effective in other systems; for example, New Zealand used annual Quality Enhancement Meetings, while Australia achieved similar benefits through sector-wide events such as the Australian Universities Quality Forum and the regular meetings of the Australian Universities Quality Agency's auditors, who are predominantly senior sector representatives. Officially launched in September 2006 with the endorsement of the Minister of Higher Education, the OQN operated in a collegial, non-hierarchical manner. It was formed as an independent, collaborative, and non-profit association involving HEIs, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Oman Accreditation Council. The network included two representatives from each institution and is governed by an elected executive committee (Carroll et al., 2009).

The OQN serves multiple interconnected roles within the national higher education QA landscape. It makes efforts in driving quality initiatives and facilitating activities that promote continuous improvement. Its primary mission is to promote a culture of quality and knowledge sharing within Oman's higher education sector (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Carroll et al., 2009). The OQN also aims to foster improvement by exchanging strategies, practices, and research to support sector-wide enhancement. The OQN tries to take a role in professional development and quality enhancement efforts (Carroll et al., 2009; Carroll & Palermo, 2006). Additionally, the OQN served as a consultative body for the Oman Accreditation Council, providing feedback on draft documents such as the Quality Audit Manual and the Appeals Manual. These documents were shared with OQN members for review and examined in dedicated workshops (Carroll et al., 2009). While it initially functioned as an informal network, its transition in 2017 into the Oman Association for Quality in Higher Education (OAQHE) marked a step towards formalising its mission and extending its involvement to include, in addition to institutional representatives, experts and professionals with experience in QA (OAQHE, 2022).

Quality training programmes

As part of efforts to implement an improved national QA system in higher education, Oman developed a National Quality Training Programme to build the sector's capacity. Recognising the sector's limited experience, the programme was created to deliver foundational training on quality standards, accreditation procedures, and practices (Carroll & Palermo, 2006; Goodliffe & Razvi, 2008). The programme was implemented in two phases (Carroll & Palermo, 2006):

- Phase One (led by international consultants under specific contractual terms) focused on raising awareness of QA and preparing institutions for the QA system. It consisted of 22 modules covering practical skills (such as key performance indicators, documentation, and audits) and broader cultural shifts (including governance, stakeholder engagement, and learning outcomes).
- Phase Two shifted from the government to the OQN. Training was developed and delivered by both local staff and some international experts. The module content expanded to include a wide range of best practices in higher education, allowing Oman to integrate local knowledge and take ownership of the system in line with the principle of sustainable Omanisation.

The quality training programmes were not limited to institutional capacity building but also included training for external reviewers and other key stakeholders involved in the national QA system (Carroll et al., 2009). A Register of External Reviewers was created to ensure that professionals with the appropriate expertise and qualifications conduct quality audits. To become a member, individuals must satisfy specific eligibility requirements, pass an evaluation process, and complete either the Oman Accreditation Council's two-day training programme, or a programme-led training approved by a recognised QA system. The register includes local nominees from HEIs in Oman and international reviewers invited through links with external quality agencies (Carroll et al., 2009). Audit panels were formed exclusively from this register, with a mix of local and international members.

The efforts undertaken between 2005 and 2010, such as refining standards, conducting training programmes, establishing the OQN, developing the national quality plan, and piloting and refining quality audits, were helpful in preparing for the implementation of the national QA system. These activities contributed to the gradual transition toward a dedicated QA authority.

2.5.2.3 Transition to OAAA and implementation of the ISA process (2010–2020)

In 2010, the council was restructured and renamed the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), expanding its mandate while maintaining the core responsibilities of its predecessor. Formally established as an independent entity through Royal Decree No. 54/2010, the OAAA has continued to advance the QA agenda in Oman by strengthening and institutionalising the national QA framework built by the council (The Education Council, 2016). The OAAA is responsible for ensuring that HEIs are aligned with the national standards to demonstrate institutional and academic quality. The OAAA also coordinates with the MOHERI to develop, improve, and update the processes for institutional and programme accreditation. The OAAA made efforts to update the institutional accreditation standards and keep the accreditation standards and procedures relevant and accurate (OAAA, 2016).

During this period, the OAAA advanced the development of the national accreditation framework for HEIs. The system follows a two-step approach: first, conducting an Institutional Quality Audit (IQA), and second, evaluating institutions against established accreditation standards (The Education Council, 2016).

Stage 1: Institutional Quality Audit (IQA)

Initiated in 2008 by the Oman Accreditation Council, as mentioned earlier, and continued by the OAAA, IQA is the first step in institutional accreditation. It focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of an institution's internal QA and enhancement systems' objectives. HEIs complete a self-review, producing a Quality Audit Portfolio, which is assessed by an external panel. The public report includes commendations for good practices, affirmations of planned improvements, and recommendations for areas needing attention. By the end of 2018, 47 out of 59 HEIs in Oman had undergone IQA. This number increased to reach 54 by the end of 2024 (OAAAQA, 2025a).

Stage 2: Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA)

Launched in 2016, ISA is the second stage, assessing whether HEIs meet nationally defined standards (OAAA, 2016). It is conducted four years after the IQA and includes a self-assessment, response to prior audit feedback, and submission of evidence. External panels review these and determine the accreditation outcome:

- Accredited: meets all standards (valid for 5 years)
- Conditionally Accredited: misses one or two standards
- On Probation: fails three or more standards

HEIs that are not fully accredited must undergo Institutional Standards Reassessment. Failure to meet standards after two reassessments may lead to license termination by the Education Council. The OAAA accredited the first HEI in December 2017 (OAAAQA, 2024d). By 2020, 26 HEIs had completed the ISA: 22 were accredited, two were conditionally accredited, and two were on probation (OAAAQA, 2025b). Consistent with practices adopted by other QA agencies, the OAAA publishes institutional review reports on its website. This approach has been described by Gosling and D'Andrea (2001) as a form of 'name and shame', which, they argued, may encourage a culture of compliance rather than meaningful engagement with educational development, due to the separation between accountability and developmental support (p. 16). Completion of the ISA process enables HEIs to enter a new cycle of institutional accreditation following the five-year validity period. This transition also marks the beginning of a new phase focused on programme-level accreditation and the implementation of the OQF.

2.5.2.4 Post-ISA: OQF, programme and institutional accreditation (2021- Present)

In January 2021, the authority was renamed the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA) by Royal Decree No. 9/2021. The decree mandated the authority to ensure that public and private schools, HEIs, and other relevant bodies comply with the academic accreditation and QA system, standards, and procedures established by the authority (Ministry of Justice & Legal Affairs, 2021b). The ISA manual, first introduced in 2016, was reviewed and refined in 2023 to support the second cycle of Institutional Accreditation. The updated standards were aligned with international benchmarks and tailored to national goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040 (OAAAQA, 2024a).

During this period, the OAAAQA continues to accredit HEIs that need to undergo ISA and initiates the second cycle of the ISA, referred to as Institutional Reaccreditation. As mentioned earlier in the previous period, the first HEI accredited in Oman in 2017 completed the reaccreditation process by the end of 2023 and was officially reaccredited in 2024 (OAAAQA, 2024d). In parallel, the OAAAQA expanded its QA mandate to include programme-level accreditation, moving beyond institutional assessments. This process formally began following the transition from the initial ISA cycle, with a focus on ensuring individual academic programmes meet national standards for relevance, quality, and leaning outcomes. As part of the programme accreditation process, the OAAAQA has already accredited two academic programmes, one at a private university and one at a public university, representing both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (OAAAQA, 2024b, 2024c).

Recently, the third version of the OQF, approved by the OAAAQA, serves as a unified system for classifying and comparing qualifications across all HEIs in Oman (OAAAQA, 2023a). It outlines objectives, structural elements, level descriptors, and the procedures for placing and reviewing qualifications on the national register of qualifications. The framework encompasses qualifications from general education, academic, vocational, and professional sectors, defining each by its level and minimum credit value. The OQF is built around ten levels, defined through common learning outcomes, and provides a standardised reference for local qualifications, recognition of prior learning, and comparability with international qualifications (OAAAQA, 2023a). To support the implementation of the OQF process, the OAAAQA organised capacity-building workshops. The first series was, held in March 2023 (OAAAQA, 2023b), and the second series in October 2024 (OAAAQA, 2024e). These workshops focused on the practical process of listing qualifications on the OQF, including writing learning outcomes, setting assessment criteria, and mapping modules to OQF levels and credit values. HEIs were also encouraged to establish internal mechanisms in preparation for the full implementation of OQF processes.

Reflecting on the gradual implementation of QA in Oman, it is clear that the system has undergone several updates. It was initially unsettled and lacked full maturity, particularly in its early phases. While the continuous development of QA system is intended to enhance awareness, accountability, and responsiveness, its frequent updates and the expanding scope of QA tasks may place increasing demands on HEIs, potentially straining their capacity to implement reforms. For UTAS, the context of this research, obtaining institutional accreditation becomes urgent as the university must fulfil other QA-related requirements, such as submitting programme accreditation applications and listing qualifications on the OQF. These obligations reflect the increasingly demanding expectations embedded within Oman's developing QA system.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter provides an overview of the historical, political, and educational developments that have shaped Oman's higher education landscape. As Oman transitioned toward a knowledge-based economy, higher education becomes increasingly central to national governance, leading to the establishment of a QA system intended to align institutions with state-defined standards and international benchmarks. The governance of higher education in Oman has been characterised by a centralised approach, wherein policy decisions, regulatory frameworks, and quality standards are determined at the national level and applied across HEIs. Shaped by policy reforms, internal developments, and national goals such as Oman Vision 2040, the QA system represents the government's efforts to establish oversight and accountability mechanisms within the higher education sector. This process led to the creation of OAAAQA as the designated regulatory body responsible for institutional accreditation.

CHAPTER 3: TRACING THE PATH OF THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) is still continuing its journey of hard work to keep pace with rapid technological changes and qualitative global transformation to achieve desired goals, in line with the targets and pillars of Oman Vision 2040, as well as contribute to achieve its indicators and forge a new path that fulfils expectations in the 11th Five-Year Development Plan.

—Said Al Rubaii, *UTAS Annual Report 2024*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the institutional context of the University of Technology of Applied Sciences (UTAS) within which this research is situated. It traces the development of the UTAS from its origins as vocational colleges to its current status as a unified, independent university. It also presents key statistics to provide an overview of the institution's size, distribution of the academic workforce, student enrolment, and programme diversity across its branches. Following this, attention shifts to the governance structure that underpins institutional decision-making. Finally, the chapter explores the growth of the university's quality assurance (QA) system, mapped across four major phases.

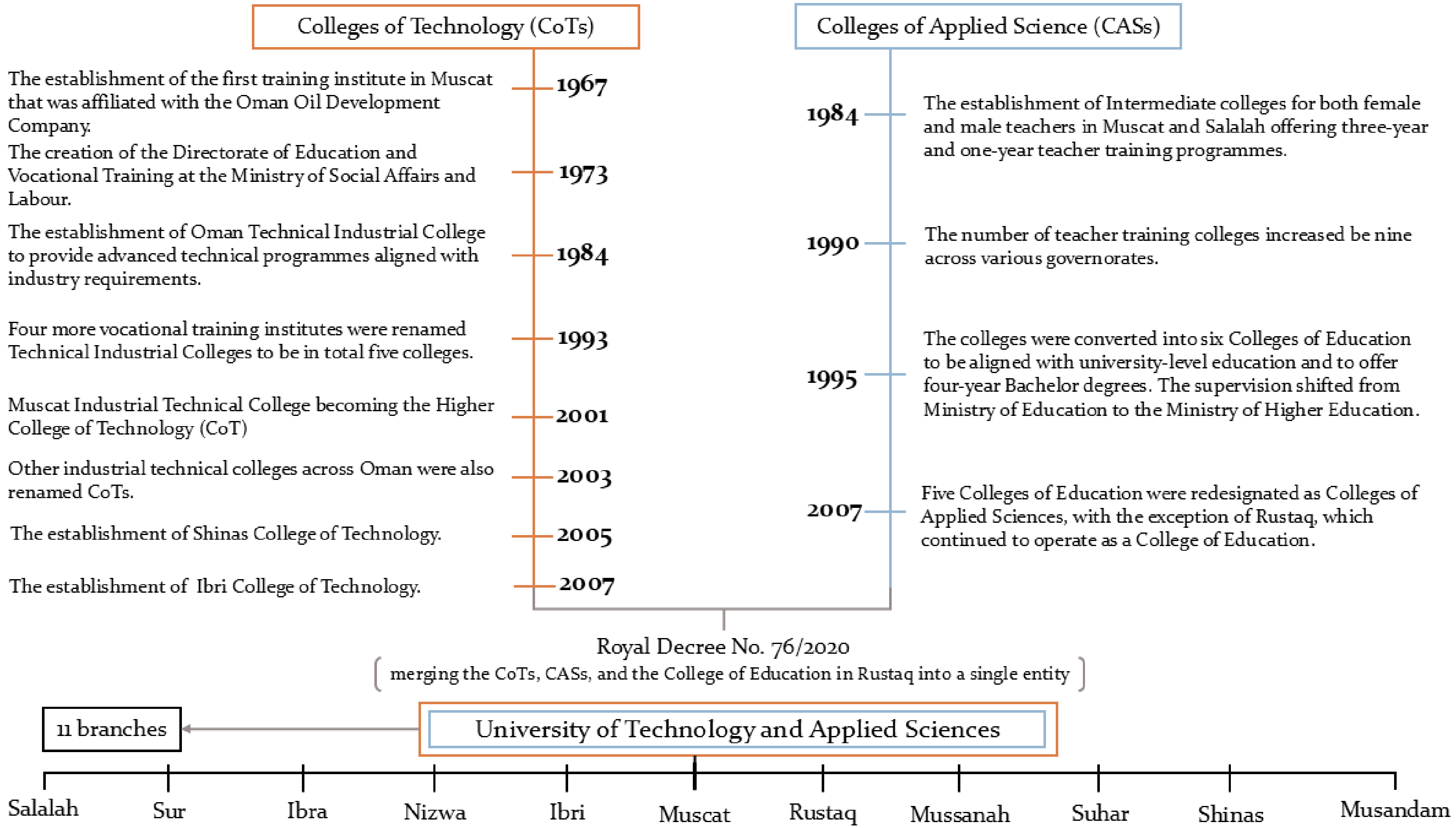
3.2 The university's historical journey: Continuity and change

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the university was formed through the merger of the Colleges of Technology (CoTs) and the Colleges of Applied Sciences (CASs), both established to meet the increasing demand for a skilled workforce in technical and applied fields. The CoTs were chosen as the primary sites for data collection because, once I began my PhD research, the university's merger was still in its early stages, and they continued to operate under the CoTs' own management system, policies, and practices during the data collection period. Since then, they have become a branch within the larger university structure. Therefore, the terms "university" and "university-branch" are used interchangeably throughout this study, with specific references to the CoTs when a more focused discussion is required. Understanding this broader institutional context is crucial, as it provides a wide view of the context in which QA system operates. Figure 5 traces the historical development of both sectors before they were merged into a university and reveals how each sector adapted through multiple phases of transformation to align with shifting national priorities and economic development needs (Al'Abri, 2020; Al Bandary, 2005; Alshahri, 2014).

After the merger, the university initially had 13 branches: six CASs and seven CoTs. However, three governorates each contained two separate branches, one CAS and one CoT, previously managed by two separate entities. To reduce administrative and financial costs, the university merged the co-located branches into a single governorate.

Figure 5

The Historical Milestones of UTAS



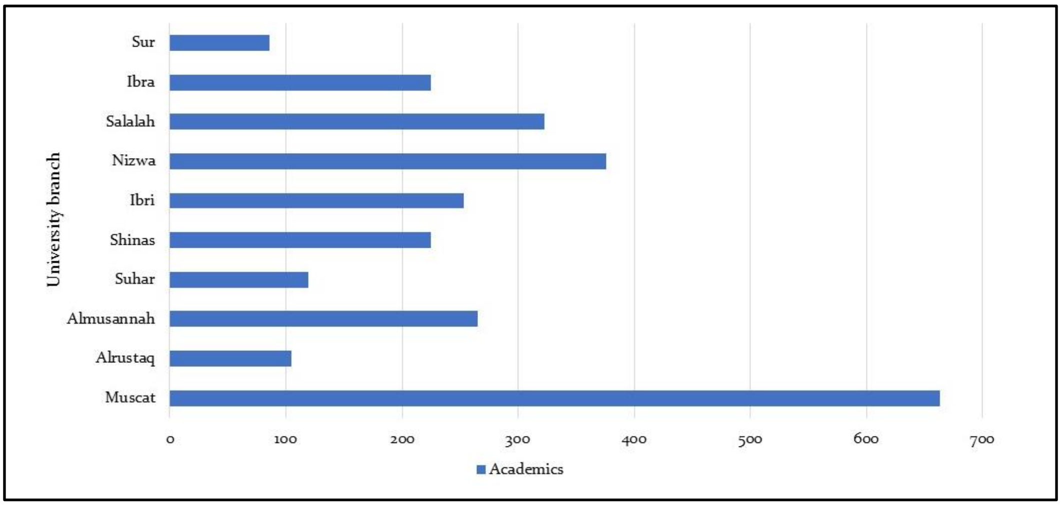
This consolidation reduced the total from 13 to 10 branches. Subsequently, in response to development requirements across various governorates and in alignment with Oman Vision 2040's emphasis on balanced regional development, the Council of Ministers approved the establishment of a new UTAS branch in the Musandam Governorate. Consequently, at the time of writing, the university operates across 11 branches.

3.3 Academic staff and students across specialisations

As of the 2022-2023 academic year, academic staff across all university departments accounted for 50% to 70% of the total workforce, including administrative and technical personnel (UTAS, 2023). The Muscat branch accounts for nearly a quarter (approximately 25%) of the university's total academic staff. This is attributable to Muscat's status as the capital city which hosts the largest population in Oman, generating high demand for higher education, a more diverse range of academic programmes and specialisations, and higher student enrolment figures compared to other branches. The branches in Ibri, Al Musannah, Salalah, and Nizwa have percentages ranging from 10% to 14%. The branches in Ibra and Shinas account for 9%, while the remaining branches range from 3% to 5% (UTAS, 2023). The bar chart below illustrates the number of academic staff across different university branches for the academic year 2022–2023. This research focuses on four university branches situated in relative geographical proximity, each with over 200 academic staff.

Figure 6

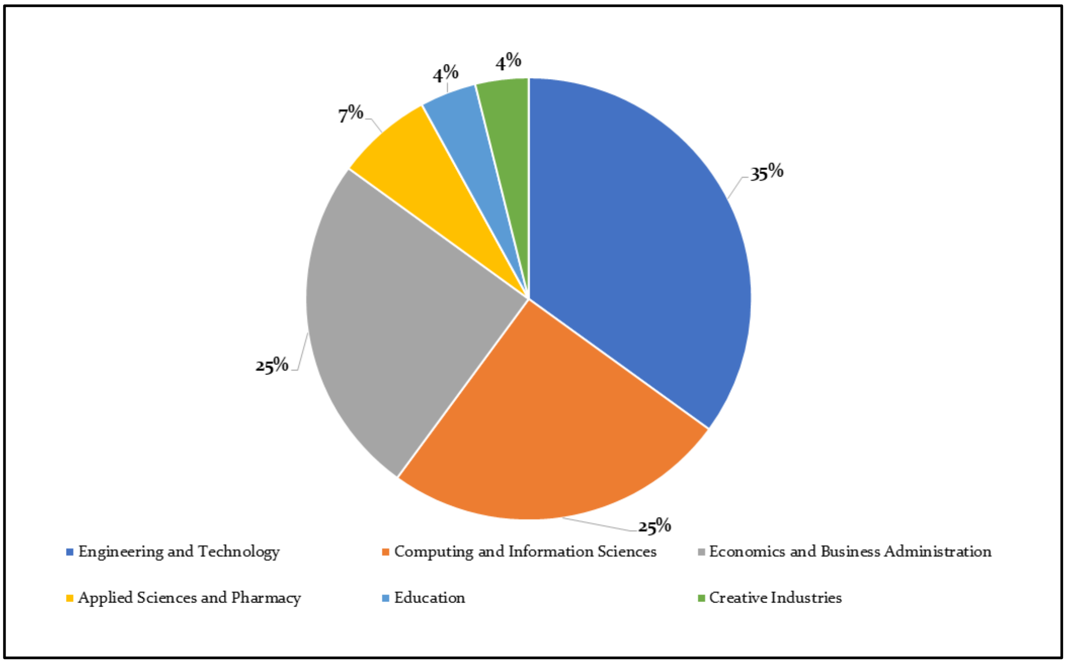
Number of Academic Staff per University Branch (AY2022–2023)



The total number of students enrolled at the university for the 2024-2025 academic year reached 46,875. This includes 22503 male students, representing 48% of the total student body, and 24372 female students, representing 52% (UTAS, 2025a). The distribution of students across various disciplines is shown in the pie chart below:

Figure 7

Student Distribution per University Discipline (AY2024-2025)



The majority of students, 85%, are enrolled in Engineering and Technology, Computing, Information Technology, and Economics and Business Administration. The remaining 15% is distributed among Applied Sciences and Pharmacy, Education, and Creative Industries. For this research study, the leading academic departments that accommodate the largest number of students in the selected branches were selected as the focus for exploring academic staff experiences.

3.4 Governance structure

The university operates within a predominantly top-down governance structure, as its objectives, organisational framework, and oversight mechanisms are defined by the government through an official decree. While the university is formally recognised as an independent entity, its autonomy is restricted by the national policy on higher education, research, and innovation, as outlined in Royal Decree 47/2021. This decree not only establishes the university's structural components, such as the roles of the University Council, Vice Chancellor, and Academic Council, but also reinforces the government's central role in shaping institutional direction (Ministry of Justice & Legal Affairs, 2021b).

At the top of the governance structure is the University Council, established by the Council of Ministers and chaired by the Minister of Labour. It includes the Vice-Chancellor of UTAS, senior government officials, and representatives from both academic and industry sectors who ensure that the university's operations align with government priorities. The council's responsibilities span from setting general policy to approving the organisational structure, strategic plans, financial budget, and audit reports, positioning it as the ultimate authority on institutional direction and priorities (Ministry of Justice & Legal Affairs, 2021b). This governance structure reflects a delicate balance, or perhaps tension, between governmental oversight and institutional independence. While the inclusion of external expertise from both public and private sectors suggests an effort to diversify perspectives, the requirement for ministerial approval on major decisions underscores the limited scope of autonomous governance. Mazawi (2005) argued that in Arab states, higher education institutions (HEIs) function as legitimising mechanisms through which governments assert political authority and justify their dominant role in regulating the sector. He further highlighted that bureaucratic control is a defining characteristic of higher education governance across Arab states, whereby institutional autonomy is considerably constrained, and state influence extends to both the external governance structures and the internal decision-making processes of universities.

Operationally, the university is led by the Vice-Chancellor, supported by four deputy vice-chancellors for academic affairs, electronic systems and student services, postgraduate studies, scientific research and innovation, and administrative and financial affairs (UTAS, 2021). The Vice-Chancellor operates within a defined regulatory framework, implementing government policies and adhering to established institutional guidelines. This position involves implementing decisions made by the university council (Ministry of Justice & Legal Affairs, 2021b). The Academic Council at UTAS was established under Royal Decree 47/2021 and formed by a decision of the Vice-

Chancellor, who serves as its chair. Its membership includes the four Deputy Vice-Chancellors, assistants to the Vice-Chancellors at all the university branches and the deans of specialised colleges or academies. The structure and function of the Academic Council at UTAS reveal an effort to centralise academic governance while ensuring representation across the branches. Each university branch has an Assistant Vice-Chancellor.

The university comprises six colleges, namely the College of Applied Sciences and Pharmacy, the College of Creative Industries, the College of Computing and Information Sciences, the College of Engineering and Technology, the College of Economics and Business Administration, and the College of Education. These colleges emerged as a direct outcome of the merger project, which enabled the university to consolidate and restructure its academic offerings into specialised colleges. The majority of colleges offer academic programmes across three qualification levels: diploma, higher diploma, and bachelor's degree, providing students with flexible progression pathways within their chosen field of specialisation, subject to meeting the relevant academic requirements (UTAS, 2023). An exception to this structure is the College of Education, whose programmes are offered exclusively at bachelor's degree level and are available only at Rustaq branch. Across all branches, each college offers a range of programmes that may vary from one branch to another, in accordance with local demand, available resources, and the developmental priorities of the respective governorate. Each college is headed by a Dean and an Associate Dean, both selected from among the university's academic staff and appointed by the university Vice-Chancellor. However, the Dean holds overall responsibility for the academic and administrative affairs of the college, operating under the administrative supervision of the Assistant Vice-Chancellor and the academic supervision of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, ensuring alignment with the university's institutional policies and regulatory requirements.

To conclude, the governance structure of UTAS reflects an interconnected organisational arrangement. This structure indicates that authority and responsibility are distributed across multiple levels of the institutional hierarchy, reflecting the layered nature of governance within the university. Such an arrangement resonates with what Deem and Brehony (2005) described as the characteristics of 'new managerialism' in higher education, wherein governance is shaped by hierarchical lines of authority, performance monitoring, and the primacy of management structures over collegial decision-making (p. 226). In the context of UTAS, the dual accountability, operating under administrative and academic lines of supervision, reflects a broader pattern in which, as Deem and Brehony (2005, p. 220) observed, the regulatory role of management structures encompasses both external and internal dimensions of institutional governance. Al Bandary (2005) noted that in Oman's higher education context specifically, colleges have historically operated within a centralised ministerial framework, where institutional decision-making has been closely directed from above, with colleges tending to defer to ministerial authority. The governance structure of UTAS therefore reflects both the global trends of managerial reform in higher education and the centralised regulatory context within which Omani HEIs operate.

3.5 QA within the university: A Two-tiered approach

QA within the university operates at two distinct levels: national assessment and institutional implementation. At the national level, external assessment was initially carried out by the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC), and later by its successor, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). This governing body is responsible for establishing national QA policies and accreditation standards. It also conducts external audits, accreditation processes and institutional assessments to ensure alignment with national standards. At the institutional level, both the Ministry of Manpower (which managed the CoTs) and the Ministry of Higher Education (which supervised the CASs) maintained central QA departments. These departments played a dominant role in ensuring compliance and monitoring processes in their respective colleges. Each College of Technology and College of Applied Sciences also had its own internal QA department. These departments were responsible for implementing and monitoring QA processes within their respective college. This ensured compliance with national standards and institutional regulations through internal audits. Given that this study focuses on four CoTs as the research context, it is essential to highlight the different phases of their QA development and adaptation. The development of this QA system can be traced through four phases, each characterised by distinct priorities, mechanisms, and challenges.

3.5.1 Phase 1 [2001-2005]: The adoption of the national QA framework

Following several structural and policy changes within the CoTs, including the transition of industrial technical colleges into CoTs and the implementation of new bylaws by 2004, the Ministry of Manpower began integrating the QA approach. This shift was driven by the establishment of the council in 2001 (Lontok et al., 2013). In 2004, the Ministry of Manpower established a QA department. The department began to ensure that all CoTs implemented the QA standards and procedures set in the Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA). This step was crucial, as the Oman Accreditation Council classified each College of Technology as a separate HEIs, requiring it to undergo institutional accreditation.

The QA department at the ministry level acted as a regulatory body that imposed the QA system on the CoTs. One of its responsibilities was to provide staff training, equipping them with the essential skills for managing quality-related tasks (Alshahri, 2014). Beyond training, the QA department conducted auditing visits, primarily to ensure compliance with the institutional bylaws, national QA standards, and the Oman Accreditation Council's requirements. These audits scrutinised the implementation of strategic and operational plans, as well as other mandated policies. Following these visits, the QA department issued audit reports that outlined compliance issues and prescribed corrective actions, guiding colleges to conform accordingly (Alshahri, 2014). It can be inferred that this initial phase represented a compliance-driven approach lacking a proper foundation in QA requirements. The QA system in CoTs was developed superficially to fulfil external requirements. According to Lontok et al. (2013), the initial implementation encountered significant barriers: unclear quality requirements, absence of staff experience in QA, increased workload pressures and limited understanding of QA purposes.

3.5.2 Phase 2 [2006 -2009]: Developing the QA system within the CoTs

The second phase coincided with the Oman Accreditation Council's release of the Quality Audit Manual in 2006, which addressed challenges in implementing the ROSQA document. In response, the council introduced formal audit visit schedules starting in 2008, covering both public and private HEIs in (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008). To prepare for these quality audits, the establishment of dedicated QA units within each College of Technology became essential. This initiative not only strengthened the colleges' commitment to their QA plans but also enhanced the Ministry's ability to oversee and support them. It provided a more structured approach to implementing national QA policies, ensuring compliance with the Quality Audit Manual and aligning with national accreditation requirements (Lontok et al., 2013). As a result, each college developed its own QA Manual.

In addition, the Ministry's QA department organised various workshops to familiarise the colleges' QA units with the audit process. These workshops covered the various audit scopes outlined in the Oman Accreditation Council's Quality Audit Manual and were conducted by both external consultants and council staff (Lontok et al., 2013). The college QA unit began reviewing its strategic plans to align with the newly established strategic goals of the CoTs, which were finalised in 2008. Each college developed sub-goals, strategies, and key performance indicators to create a more detailed and measurable strategic plan. During this phase, the CoTs began implementing the QA mechanisms outlined in the manual to maintain compliance with the standards and prepare for external reviews.

3.5.3 Phase 3 [2010 -2020]: Accreditation process

The third phase represents the most intensive period of QA. Between 2010 and 2015, the CoTs and even the CASs underwent a significant phase in their QA journey, moving through Stage 1 of the Institutional Quality Audit (IQA). Supervised by the Ministry of Manpower and the Ministry of Higher Education, all colleges engaged in a thorough and structured IQA, emphasising compliance with national QA standards. Stage 1 focused on establishing a strong foundation for institutional QA system, ensuring the colleges met the necessary criteria for institutional accreditation.

The primary goal during this phase was to establish the colleges as legitimate, accountable, and quality-driven institutions in line with the OAAA standards. The IQA played a role in ensuring adherence to national guidelines and best practices in higher education. For the Ministry of Manpower and the Ministry of Higher Education, achieving OAAA accreditation became a priority during this period, so they closely guided the colleges through each stage, ensuring they were fully prepared for the external audits and reviews conducted by the OAAA. Each college was required to submit a detailed portfolio as part of the institutional accreditation process. Preparing these portfolios demanded significant effort, with a strong focus on internal evaluation and continuous improvement. These self-assessment reports demonstrated the colleges' commitment to QA, continuous monitoring, and adherence to national policies.

To prepare for these audits, the QA department within the senior management organised some workshops and training sessions. These sessions aimed to help the colleges understand the accreditation process and the specific requirements of Stage 1. External consultants led some workshops, while others were conducted by OAAA staff. This capacity-building effort ensured the colleges were equipped to navigate the complexities of the accreditation process (Lontok et al., 2013). By 2015, all colleges had completed Stage 1 of the institutional accreditation process. This completion marked a significant achievement, formally recognising their commitment to maintaining quality standards in higher education. The accreditation reports issued following the audits highlighted areas of strength and areas for improvement (OAAAQA, 2025a).

Looking ahead, the colleges began preparing for Stage 2 of the institutional accreditation process, which further assessed their progress in implementing the QA system and meeting national accreditation standards. Stage 2, set to be completed between 2020 and 2021, involved a more in-depth evaluation of the colleges' ongoing commitment to QA, including the effectiveness of their strategies for continuous improvement. This phase represented a critical transition for the CoTs, from meeting basic accreditation requirements to embedding a culture of QA and continuous institutional development. Significantly for my research, this phase established QA as a permanent and prominent part of academic life. By 2020, QA had shifted from an occasional administrative requirement to an ongoing, extensive dimension of academic work, embedded in job descriptions, performance appraisal, and daily practices. Whether this embedding has driven meaningful quality improvement or instead produced the kind of performativity described by Ball (2003), characterised by compliance and performance display, is open to consideration.

3.5.4 Phase 4 [2020 – Present]: Post-merger university transition

The last and current phase of QA development at UTAS began with the university merger project in 2020 and continues to the present. This phase is characterised by attempts to unify QA systems across the formerly separate colleges and to address new quality expectations arising from university status. The merger created immediate QA challenges. Stage 2 of the accreditation process for these colleges, initially scheduled for 2020 and 2021, was put on hold while the newly established university underwent significant structural and academic changes. Unifying these systems required extensive mapping exercises, policy management and the development of common procedures and practices.

The focus during this phase was on establishing governance structures, enhancing academic programmes, and integrating support services to create a more integrated and inclusive institutional system. While the university implemented these developmental changes, the QA system itself developed in parallel, moving beyond its administrative function toward a role in strategic planning, institutional restructuring, and policy alignment. In 2025, the university announced the resumption of the accreditation process, with the quality audit assessment set for submission to the OAAAQA in January 2028. Unlike the previous approach, where individual colleges submitted separate institutional assessment portfolios, the university will now submit a unified portfolio that incorporates branch-specific considerations where necessary. To oversee this process, the university has established a dedicated committee comprising senior management, two Assistant Pro-Vice-Chancellors from two branches, and the Head of the QA department within the university's senior management. This committee is responsible for governing and managing the preparation of the accreditation portfolio. As part of the process, subcommittees have been formed, involving representatives from each branch, to ensure complete coverage of all QA standards and criteria.

As the largest university in Oman, UTAS faces increasing pressure, especially since none of its branches have received institutional accreditation. To improve its reputation for quality and remain competitive with other HEIs in the country, the university has recently joined the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies (INQAAHE) (UTAS, 2025b). This global opportunity marks a significant milestone, as the university aims to boost its international reputation and credibility. Through this affiliation, UTAS seeks to position itself as an institution dedicated to academic quality and adherence to international standards. Membership also lays a foundation for future recognition of the university's reputation and the value of its academic qualifications. Furthermore, the university hopes to benefit from global expertise in QA, including reviewing and refining standards, enhancing teaching and learning practices, and actively engaging in international workshops, training programmes, and research related to QA (UTAS, 2025b). As I undertake this research in 2022, UTAS remains in what might be termed a transition phase. Formal QA systems had been unified, but implementation may remain uneven across campuses. The extent to which quality culture is embraced as a shared value rather than imposed as a compliance requirement varies considerably. Academic staff are navigating changing and sometimes unclear quality expectations.

3.6 Concluding remarks

The research context is shaped by a significant structural transformation: the merger of the former CoTs and CASs into a unified university. Tracing this development and understanding how it unfolded is essential not only for situating the study but also for realising the complex layers of governance, strategic direction, and reform that continue to shape academic work. By examining governance structures and key decision-making bodies, such as university councils, I became increasingly aware of how institutional change can intersect with and at times unsettle the existing QA system. It also indicates that the merger and QA are closely linked in ways that warrant further investigation as the university continues to develop. While the merger is part of the institutional context, it also influences or complicates QA-related perceptions and practices. These initial insights, rooted in the university's historical and organisational context, provide an entry point to the deeper exploration of the findings and discussion chapters, especially regarding how staff interpret QA within a post-merger institutional setting.

CHAPTER 4: INSIGHTS THROUGH LITERATURE

Quality in higher education is an attractive and important field not only for higher education institutions but also for their stakeholders. However, the research field is very complex due to the overlapping and interlinking of its topics. Over the years, an enormous amount of studies has been devoted to exploring different topics.

—Khaled Alzafari, *'Quality in higher education' using co-word Analysis*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on quality assurance (QA) in higher education, a field that is characterised as extensive and complex. As Alzafari (2017) noted, "The research field is very complex due to the overlapping and interlinking of its topics" (p.264). Given this complexity, this review focuses on aspects most relevant to my study's focus. The chapter begins by examining concepts of quality and QA in higher education, before turning to the outcomes of QA in practice at the global level. The focus then narrows to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, followed by a closer examination of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context. The chapter concludes with a summary that highlights the key insights emerging from these discussions and identifies the gaps that this study seeks to address.

4.2 QA in higher education: A conceptual overview

Over the last three decades and into recent years, researchers have made seminal contributions to shaping and establishing the concepts of quality and quality assurance in higher education. Before examining how QA systems operate in practice, it is essential to establish what is meant by both quality and quality assurance in the higher education context. These terms, though frequently used, remain contested and carry different meanings across institutional contexts, systems, and stakeholder groups. This section examines different definitions surrounding both concepts, beginning with debating conceptions of quality and then moving to the various definitions of QA.

4.2.1 Conceptualising quality

A review of both earlier and recent literature reveals a persistent lack of consensus around the definition of quality in higher education (Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2024a; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Lindsay, 1992; Middlehurst, 1992; Mullaicharam & Al Lawatia, 2015; Newton, 2002a; Schindler et al., 2015; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007; Watty 2003). As Lindsay, (1992) stated:

> Although "quality" has become the focus of attention, its meaning is not always clear nor its usage consistent. Indeed, the notion of quality in higher education has no agreed technical meaning and its use usually

> involves a heavy contextual overlay of some political or educational position. (p. 153)

Lindsay (1992) identified two key perspectives on quality: the production-measurement view and the stakeholder-judgment view. The former treats quality as a measurable construct, focusing on performance indicators such as inputs, processes, and outcomes. In contrast, the stakeholder-judgment view emphasises that quality is shaped by the values, expectations, and judgments of various stakeholders, including students, academics, employers, and policymakers. This latter perspective recognises that educational quality is not objective or static but socially constructed and context-dependent.

Middlehurst (1992) and Harvey and Green (1993) extended this interpretive approach, arguing that any attempt to define or measure quality must be situated within the purposes of higher education and the sociopolitical contexts in which higher education institutions (HEIs) operate. Harvey and Green (1993) identified five distinct categories reflecting different conceptions of quality, each underpinned by specific stakeholder perspectives and oriented toward either processes or outcomes. These categories are summarised below.

1. ***Quality as exceptional*** views quality as distinctive and special, with three variations: traditional directiveness (where elite institutions like Oxbridge inherently embody quality), excellence (exceeding high standards in inputs and outputs), and meeting minimum required standards through quality checks.

2. ***Quality as perfection or consistency*** focuses on zero defects and getting things right the first time through conformance to specifications. This approach democratises quality by emphasising process and prevention within a quality culture in which everyone takes responsibility at each stage.

3. ***Quality as fitness for purpose*** defines quality relative to fulfilling intended missions or objectives. This functional conception includes meeting customer specifications or achieving institutional goals and recognises that quality is context-dependent and stakeholder-relative.

4. ***Quality as value for money*** links quality to accountability and efficiency, judging institutions through performance indicators, cost-effectiveness, and return on investment. This market-driven approach emphasises achieving more with less while maintaining accountability to funders and customers.

5. ***Quality as transformation*** conceptualises quality as fundamental change through value-added (enhancing students' knowledge and abilities) and empowerment (developing conceptual capacities and self-awareness). This view recognises education as an active, negotiated process rather than a service delivered to passive consumers.

Newton (2002a) reinforced the importance of understanding how different actors interpret quality in practice. He argued:

> At the operational level, `quality' can only be properly understood relative to how actors, particularly `front-line' actors, construe and construct `quality' or `the quality system'. This requires that close attention is paid to actors' subjectivities and how this influences how they `cope' with, `shape', or even `subvert' quality policy. (p. 48)

This requires close attention to how institutional actors' perspectives shape whether they embrace, adapt to, or resist quality policies. Watty (2003) added that quality, "like other concepts, including conflict, dissatisfaction, guilt and forgiveness, it is not always observable" (p. 215). He argued against viewing quality as perfection, noting that higher education does not seek defect-free graduates and that process-focused approaches have limitations in educational contexts.

Building on these debates, Schindler et al. (2015) proposed a multidimensional model that frames quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable. Drawing on decades of research, they identified more than 50 specific quality indicators across four domains: administrative, student support, instructional, and student performance. This framework acknowledges that quality is not singular but a synthesis of perspectives reflecting both intrinsic and instrumental values in higher education.

An alternative conception emerged that frames quality as a process of organisational sense-making rather than a measurable endpoint. Drawing on Weick's (1995) theory of sense-making, Marshall (2016) conceptualised quality as a dynamic and interpretive process through which institutions make sense of educational practice. Unlike compliance-based frameworks that emphasise benchmarking or standardisation, this view regards quality as an opportunity for ongoing reflection, dialogue, and contextual learning. Marshall (2016) argued that defining and measuring quality can serve as a lens for re-evaluation, explore new ideas and possibilities that build on their intrinsic qualities of the institutional system. In doing so, this allows change to occur without necessarily disrupting existing meanings and values held by different stakeholders. This conception values diverse voices and positions quality as constructed through collective engagement, an iterative and adaptive process that supports strategic planning and organisational learning.

Beyond these major frameworks, the literature reveals numerous additional conceptualisations that further enrich and extend the debate (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Brennan & Shah, 2000a; Cheng, 2017; Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Tam, 2001; Tavadze, 2023; Van Kemenade et al., 2008). As summarised in Table 1, which is based on Harvey's (2024a) discussion, these diverse perspectives demonstrate that quality remains contested and context-dependent, shaped by differing epistemological assumptions, stakeholder values, and institutional contexts.

Table 1

Alternative Conceptualisations of Quality in Higher Education

Source	Framing or Model of quality	Key elements / Description
Reeves and Bednar (1994)	Multiple definitions of quality	Value, conformance to specifications, conformance to requirements, fitness for use, loss avoidance, meeting or exceeding expectations.
Brennan and Shah (2000a)	Four quality values	Academic, managerial, pedagogic, and employment-focused dimensions of quality.
Tam (2001)	Three models of quality	(1) Input-output production model (2) value-added approach

		(3) total quality experience approach.
Van Kemenade et al. (2008),	Four constituents of quality	Quality as composed of object, standard, subject, and value.
Beerkens and Udam (2017)	Stakeholder engagement model	Quality as engagement aimed at achieving intrinsic excellence, effective teaching, and a genuine desire for learning.
Cheng (2017)	Quality as professional virtue	Emphasises enhancing academic staff expertise and empowering student learning; quality as a virtue of practice.
Tavadze (2023)	'Thick' notion of quality	Advocates for a holistic understanding based on well-being, dialogue, criticality, and openness, rather than performance metrics.

Calls for a single, agreed-upon definition of quality in higher education have persisted for decades. However, as Harvey (2024a) argued, this remains "a pipe dream as the definitions are not compatible or anyway combinable. The definitions are hugely at variance, both epistemologically and ideologically" *(*p. 153). Given this complexity, research and policy attention have shifted from defining quality to assuring it, leading to a growing emphasis on QA in higher education.

4.2.2 Defining quality assurance

QA in higher education has been the subject of considerable debate, with researchers and policymakers proposing varied conceptualisations that reflect different assumptions about how quality should be operationalised and governed in increasingly diverse higher education systems. Harvey and Green (1993) offered an early perspective that emphasised relational and stakeholder-dependent. They argued:

> Quality assurance is not about specifying the standards or specifications against which to measure or control quality" but rather about "ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered. (p. 19)

This perspective aligns with their fitness-for-purpose conception of quality, in which institutions set their own quality objectives and QA focuses on verifying that effective systems exist to achieve them.

Despite this early emphasis on process-oriented and procedural mechanisms for quality delivery, subsequent definitions emphasised regulatory and standards-based approaches. Petersen (1999) defined QA as encompassing "all planned and systematic action necessary to provide confidence that (international) standards of education, scholarship, and qualification are being maintained and enhanced" (p. 15). Likewise, Woodhouse (1999) framed QA as the "policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced" (p. 30). Both highlighted QA as a regulatory mechanism focused on standard maintenance.

El-Khawas (2007) expanded this regulatory perspective by emphasising external oversight, defining QA as "governmental policies that call on institutions of higher education to submit to some form of external scrutiny in order to provide public assurances that they offer worthwhile services to society" (p. 24). She positioned public monitoring as central to QA, intended not only to verify institutional performance but also to identify, anticipate, or prevent potential problems. This represents what Vidovich (2002) termed "steering at a distance", an approach that holds higher education institutions (HEIs) accountable for quality while preserving their autonomy, avoiding both direct state control and complete institutional independence (p. 402).

Building on these regulatory foundations, Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) broadened QA's scope, defining it as an all-embracing, continuous process of evaluation encompassing assessment, monitoring, maintenance, and improvement of quality across systems, institutions, and programmes. Their definition underscores QA's dual role in ensuring accountability and promoting improvement, while warning against reductive tendencies such as ranking or oversimplified benchmarking. They emphasised consistency, transparency, and agreed criteria. These principles are increasingly vital in a global higher education landscape driven by comparability and competitiveness.

Other researchers adopted more forward-looking perspectives that viewed QA as developmental rather than regulatory. For example, Cheng (2003) proposed a three-wave model of QA that reflects its growing focus over time. The first wave focused on internal QA and emphasised improving institutional processes to ensure teaching and learning effectiveness in achieving planned goals. The second wave, known as interface QA, emerged in the 1980s and situated quality assurance within a social context in which meeting stakeholder needs and ensuring public accountability became central criteria. In this dimension, the focus shifts to interface effectiveness and institutional adaptability. The third wave called future QA and emphasised aligning educational aims, content, and outcomes with the anticipated needs of future generations, reflecting a more proactive and anticipatory stance. Doherty (2012) reinforced this forward-looking perspective, distinguishing quality assurance from quality control by characterising QA as a proactive approach that attempts to identify and prevent problems before they occur, rather than correcting them after the fact. He noted that QA initiatives are clearly aimed at reducing costs and improving processes.

More recently, in his extended editorial reflecting on 30 years of quality discourse, Harvey (2024a) built on these perspectives, framing QA as a set of internal and external policies, systems, and practices designed to achieve, maintain, and enhance quality. He noted that QA has become a generic umbrella term encompassing all forms of quality review, ranging from audits and evaluations to internal self-assessments, blurring earlier distinctions between assessment and assurance. This development raises important questions about the boundaries of QA as a concept, specifically, whether expanding its concern beyond procedural mechanisms diffuses institutional focus, or whether a more integrative approach better supports sustained quality improvement.

It is important to underline, terminologically, the use of "QA" as an overarching term throughout this thesis. Much of the literature treats quality assurance and quality enhancement as analytically distinct (e.g. Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Williams, 2016). Elassy (2015), however, argued that QA and QE are better understood as a continuum rather than two separate processes, with QA functioning diagnostically and QE following as a treatment process addressing the limitations QA uncovers. Williams (2016) noted that this framing overlooks assurance's primary accountability function, the reporting of information to external stakeholders, but nonetheless credited it with a useful underlying principle that assurance processes can generate institutional data capable of informing subsequent improvement efforts. The Oman Authority for

Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance (OAAAQA) operates as a single regulatory body responsible for both the accountability and improvement dimensions of quality work, and "QA" functions locally, in policy documents, institutional structures, and everyday usage, as an umbrella term including both. This is not unique to Oman: it is broadly consistent with regulatory arrangements across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and wider the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

4.3 QA in practice globally: What it seeks to achieve?

The preceding discussion of quality concepts and QA definitions reveals that how quality is formed shapes what QA systems are designed to do. Despite varied conceptualisations, the literature identifies a set of recurring purposes that underpin QA across higher education systems, namely ensuring accountability through external oversight and supporting continuous improvement through internal processes (Newton, 2004, 2007; Singh, 2010). However, these purposes are neither neutral nor naturally complementary. They are shaped by competing political, economic, and academic demands, and are experienced differently by various stakeholders and contexts (Newton, 2004, 2007; Singh, 2010). Singh (2010) captured this multiplicity, noting that QA simultaneously serves social accountability, academic improvement, institutional efficiency, value for money, and consumer protection, with the relative weight of each shifting across contexts. One of the most analytical frameworks for understanding QA purposes is that of Harvey and Newton (2004), who identified four principal rationales for external quality evaluation: accountability, control, compliance, and improvement. Harvey and Newton (2004) argued that the rhetoric of improvement pervades policy documents, yet the actual emphases of most QA systems fall overwhelmingly on accountability, compliance, and control.

Rosa et al. (2012), drawing on both the higher education and organisational performance literatures, extended this framework by proposing five interconnected purposes for quality assessment: communication, motivation, control, improvement, and innovation. Their empirical study of Portuguese academics revealed that, although all five purposes received some degree of support, improvement and communication were viewed most favourably, while control and motivation attracted notably lower levels of agreement. This finding is significant because it suggests that academic staff, the actors upon whom effective QA implementation depends, favour purposes aligned with enhancement and transparency over those oriented towards regulation and behavioural compliance. As Rosa et al. (2012) argued, this has direct implications for the design of QA systems, since systems that fail to reflect academic values and priorities risk undermining the engagement necessary for their success.

The following discussion examines the principal purposes of QA in detail, drawing primarily on Harvey and Newton (2004) and Rosa et al. (2012), and incorporating relevant empirical literature.

4.3.1 Accountability: Towards managerial control

Accountability has been the dominant and most politically visible rationale for establishing QA systems, particularly in publicly funded higher education sectors (Brennan & Shah, 2000b; El-Khawas, 2007; Harvey & Newton, 2004). While improvement rhetoric frequently features in policy documents, the political initiative behind most external evaluation is essentially about establishing delegated accountability (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Even in systems that foreground improvement language, accountability has served as the central logic, the non-negotiable baseline from which all other purposes are permitted to develop.

Harvey and Newton (2004) identified three distinct dimensions of accountability. The first relates to funders: the cost of massification and the need to prioritise public expenditure create pressure to ensure value for both private and public investment. The second addresses accountability to students, encompassing assurance that programmes are properly organised and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered. The third concerns the generation of public information about institutional and programme quality for prospective students, employers, and funding bodies. Yet Harvey and Newton (2004) noted that there is little evidence that students or employers make much use of information produced by quality monitoring evaluations.

While few would dispute the principle that publicly funded HEIs should account for how resources are used, the specific forms that accountability takes within QA systems are widely contested. Harvey (2024a) argued that accountability, as operationalised in QA, aligns closely with managerialism and budgetary constraints, often framed in terms of value for money, fitness for purpose, or performance effectiveness. These formulations reduce educational processes to measurable outcomes, prioritising indicator achievement over significant educational quality. The result is a narrowing of QA discourse to what can be counted, audited, or benchmarked, rather than to what contributes to meaningful learning (Harvey, 2024a). Singh (2010) raised a complementary concern from a systemic perspective, questioning whether QA's primary function has shifted towards political and economic accountability rather than educational benefit. She warned that as reputational and economic competition in higher education increases, current versions of QA may yield ground to performance indicators, ranking systems, and other metricated evaluation instruments.

Newton's (2000, 2002a, 2002b) seminal empirical studies provided foundational evidence of how academics experience accountability-driven QA in practice. Through detailed case study research involving interviews with academics across different UK institutional contexts, Newton (2000) demonstrated that when QA is associated with managerial objectives, quality appears to academics as 'accountability' and 'managerialism' rather than as a means for educational improvement (p. 155). His research revealed that frontline academics are neither passive recipients of managerial requirements nor overtly confrontational. Instead, they interpret, shape, and selectively respond to various aspects of the QA system as they interact with it, adapting where necessary and resisting where possible. Newton (2000) argued that if the intention is to improve the quality of teaching and learning, "more attention needs to be paid, by institutions and external quality bodies, to the importance of the conditions and context of academics' work. Otherwise, quality monitoring is liable to be invested with a `beast-like' presence requiring to be `fed' with ritualistic practices by academics seeking to meet accountability requirements" (p. 162).

This warning proved prescient. In a follow-up study, Newton's (2002b) mapped a range of academic responses to accountability requirements, ranging from 'intransigent' (minimalist engagement) and 'colonised' (ritualistic and tokenistic) to 'convert' (enthusiastic conformance), 'rational adapter' (mainly senior managers making the most of the situation), 'pragmatic sceptic' (procedural approach leading to adaptation but sceptical of any improvement), 'sinking' (overwhelmed by bureaucracy), 'coping' (burdensome but managing), and 'reconstructing' (actively developing own quality tools) (Newton, 2002a, pp. 54–55). What is striking about this classification is not the diversity of responses itself, but what unites them. Across nearly all categories, the predominant stance is one of scepticism and strategic compliance rather than ownership. The 'turbulence and uncertainty' created by what Newton's (2002b) termed 'invasive quality monitoring arrangements' produces diverse coping strategies but rarely produces the kind of authentic engagement with quality that accountability systems claim to foster. Even the most positive response, the 'convert', is characterised as conformance rather than conviction, suggesting that even apparent buy-in may be more performative than fundamental (p.373).

Newton's early findings have been widely confirmed by subsequent research across different global contexts and institutional settings. The finding that emerges from this body of work is remarkably stable: accountability dominates, improvement is marginalised, and academics remain unconvinced that QA serves their core educational purposes. Harvey (2024c), synthesising three decades of evidence from the journal *Quality in Higher Education*, concluded that "quality assurance has never aligned with either academic practice nor academics' conceptualisation of quality. Accountability has always overshadowed improvement, to the extent that many academics see no benefit from the laborious quality exercise" (p.373).

4.3.2 Control through surveillance

Closely related to accountability, control represents a more explicit regulatory purpose of QA (Harvey & Newton, 2004, 2007). While accountability asks HEIs to demonstrate that they are performing well, control goes further; it seeks to determine and restrict what HEIs can do and how they do it. Harvey and Newton (2004) noted that, in many countries, governments use quality monitoring and accreditation, alongside financial controls and ministerial decrees, to restrict the operations of substandard providers and maintain the sector's legitimacy and integrity. Control also addresses the comparability of standards and student achievement, both nationally and internationally, through mechanisms such as externally set examinations, threshold descriptors, and external examiners (Harvey & Newton, 2004).

Not all forms of control operate in the same way, and recent research has sought to distinguish among the modes through which governments exercise regulatory power over higher education. Misra and Stensaker (2024) identified three distinct forms of state control over higher education. The first, means-based control, imposes tight restrictions over the structures and practices of HEIs, leaving little flexibility for institutional change. The second, goal-based control, requires institutions to fulfil defined policy goals while granting some autonomy in how they pursue them. The third, environment-based control, operates by shaping the norms, values, and rules of the institutional environment, affording greater operational freedom to institutions that function within those parameters. This distinction matters because it shows that control does not operate in a single way but rather through different degrees of pressure and flexibility. However, Misra and Stensaker (2024) also cautioned that when excessive control is applied across multiple domains simultaneously, the result is a constrained operational space in which academic flexibility and autonomy exist in theory but remain largely symbolic.

Rosa et al. (2012) reached a similar conclusion from a different perspective. Conceptualising control as one of five interconnected QA purposes, they emphasised that effective control requires a complete loop, measures, targets, verification, feedback, and appropriate action. Their empirical findings from Portugal revealed that academics showed notably less support for the control purpose compared with improvement and communication, particularly when control was directed at individual academic performance rather than at institutional or programme level. This resistance is not only attitudinal. Anderson (2008), drawing on interviews with academics in ten Australian universities, demonstrated that academics actively resist control-oriented managerial practices through a range of strategies, from overt protest to subtle everyday forms of non-compliance, all underpinned by a discourse rooted in traditional academic values of autonomy and academic judgement. These two studies underlined a central and permanent tension in QA design: academics do not reject quality improvement as a goal, but they resist the mechanisms of control through which it is frequently pursued, perceiving such mechanisms as interruptions on the professional autonomy they regard as essential to academic work.

One of the most significant critiques in the literature concerns how control operates not through direct intervention or explicit exclusion, but through understated mechanisms of observation, documentation, and evaluation that make academic work visible and subject to external judgment. Research conducted across different national contexts and extending over more than two decades, revealed a consistent finding: QA functions as a form of surveillance that reshapes academic behaviour without necessarily appearing coercive on the surface (Anderson, 2006; Barrow, 1999; Romanowski & Karkouti, 2022).

This line of argument can be found back to Barrow's (1999) study of New Zealand polytechnics. He demonstrated that quality management systems serve as mechanisms for controlling academic work through surveillance. He explained that "the government of the academic is not achieved by direct intervention, rather the state and the management of an institution maintain a degree of surveillance from a distance that ensures that the requirements of the system are met" (p. 35). The phrase 'surveillance from a distance' captures a mode of control that does not require physical oversight or overt instruction but works through the knowledge that academic activities are being observed, recorded, and evaluated.

Anderson's (2006) Australian study confirmed this point in a different institutional setting. Academics in Anderson's research perceived QA processes as embedded within power relations, with evaluation by 'superiors' functioning as surveillance that conflicts with professional autonomy in collegial academic settings (p. 164). Some academics explicitly identified performance appraisal as a control mechanism, one that, rather than recognising achievements or supporting professional development, operated as an indirect monitoring system. Records from appraisals were stored and may later be used in ways that raise concerns about surveillance and future consequences. The findings from New Zealand and Australia pointed to a form of control that is neither dramatic nor contested, but extensive, shaping academic behaviour through the awareness that one's work is continuously subject to external scrutiny.

Beyond surveillance, control also operates through the normalising power of standards, defining what counts as legitimate educational practice in increasingly narrow terms. Romanowski and Karkouti's (2022) analysis within the United States context questioned whether accreditation dilutes academic freedom. They argued that standardisation is a core control mechanism within accreditation, and that the central elements of accreditation processes negatively affect academic freedom by shaping curricula through external performance assessments that constrain what can be taught and how learning is assessed. The accreditation process, they contended, has changed the culture of higher education, resulting in curricula shaped by external mandates rather than academic judgment.

4.3.3 Compliance: Regulation, resistance and ritual

Compliance, as a function of QA, centres on ensuring that HEIs conform to externally defined standards, procedures, and regulatory expectations. Harvey and Newton (2004) argued that external quality evaluation promotes institutional adherence to governmental policies, both new and established, as HEIs face increasing pressure to demonstrate cost-effectiveness, address societal and economic priorities, and expand participation in higher education. Yet this regulatory function carries an inherent tension. Harvey and Newton (2004) warned that quality monitoring can also function as "a smoke screen to ensure compliance to resource restrictions" (p. 152), making the consequences of rapid expansion without adequate investment.

Over time, compliance has gradually assumed the primary role of QA, frequently overshadowing its other intended purposes, such as enhancement, transformation, and accountability for learning outcomes. Harvey (2023) concluded:

> Quality assurance isn't just about awakening institutions to a revised set of responsibilities but has developed a life of its own, a life that questionably fails to match academic expectations, that leads to over-management of higher education resulting in less concern with delivering

> a good learning experience and more concern with compliance, ratings and funding. (p. 164)

Newton’s (2000) metaphor of 'feeding the beast' has proven remarkably strong as a characterisation of compliance-driven QA. He described how quality monitoring became invested with a “beast-like presence requiring to be 'fed' with ritualistic practices by academics seeking to meet accountability requirements” (p. 153). The metaphor captures the perception among academic staff that QA becomes an autonomous, demanding entity that requires continuous documentation, reporting, and procedural adherence to be satisfied, irrespective of whether such activities contribute to genuine educational improvement. The lasting significance of Newton’s metaphor is remarkable. Two decades later, Harvey (2024c) described how the QA system had become “a ‘beast’ to be fed through ritualistic and largely meaningless practices, resulting in dramaturgical compliance and game playing” (p. 369). That the same metaphor carries such weight two decades later, despite years of claimed refinement and maturation in QA systems, reveals how persistently unchanged the nature of compliance-driven QA remains.

A consistent finding across empirical studies conducted in diverse national contexts is that academics experience compliance requirements as bureaucratic impositions that divert time and energy from their core academic activities. This perception is neither isolated nor context-specific; rather, it emerges as a recurring theme in research across Australia, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, and Finland, suggesting a systemic dynamic inherent to compliance-based QA, regardless of cultural or institutional context (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Cheng, 2009; Kalfa et al., 2018; Overberg, 2019; Pham; 2018).

In the United Kingdom, Cheng’s (2009) survey of 64 academics across five faculties at a single HEI found that participants frequently raised the term ‘bureaucracy,’ revealing a tension between the hierarchical nature of audit and academics’ self-perception as autonomous professionals. Half the respondents resented the time cost of audit-related paperwork, expressing a desire to control their own work rather than “being told to complete administrative tasks that did not benefit their teaching or research” (Cheng, 2009, p. 200). Significantly, respondents deployed the terms ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘bureaucratic’ “as a label for jobs they did not want to do, such as peer observation, audit-related work and administrative jobs" (Cheng, 2009, p. 200), framing compliance activities as superficial to, and detached from, meaningful academic quality work.

In Vietnam, Pham's (2018) assessment of accreditation at a single university concluded that "limited improvements were reported during the entire process of accreditation. On the contrary, many believed that the (time and financial) costs outweighed the benefits" (p. 181). Essentially, she underlined that as long as the university perceived accreditation as an externally imposed obligation, it would "continue to engage in superficial or apparent compliance to deal with external accreditors" (p. 181). This finding highlights a causal relationship between perceived coercion and performative engagement: mandatory compliance, when experienced as lacking intrinsic value, generates surface-level rather than substantive institutional responses.

When compliance is experienced as imposed and lacking educational value, it generates diverse forms of institutional resistance. Research across multiple contexts reveals a spectrum of responses, from minimal adherence and over-compliance designed to boost institutional credibility (Salto, 2018), to cultures of silent resistance rooted in the defence of academic values and professional autonomy (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Kalfa et al., 2018; Overberg, 2019). This resistance tends to be subtle rather than organised, demonstrating as avoidance, qualified compliance, or the strategic production of documentation designed to satisfy auditors without prompting any meaningful change. Overberg's (2019) research on Finnish higher education provides a particularly specific case. Her findings showed that resistance to quality management rarely took an open or organised form, tending instead to unfold in quieter, less visible ways. This aligns with research in other national contexts (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Kalfa et al., 2018).

Alvesson and Spicer (2016) argued that academics' erosion of autonomy is reinforced through multiple overlapping forms of power, including coercive mechanisms such as rewards and punishment, the shaping of norms and values, and the gradual construction of new academic identities through managerial discourse. Kalfa et al. (2018), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of the game in a study of an Australian regional university, found that academics largely chose to comply with new managerial imperatives, including the introduction of performance appraisals, rather than openly contesting them. Instead of resisting, academics concentrated their efforts on accumulating capital within the new order, adapting their behaviour to meet its demands while leaving its underlying logic largely unchallenged. Crucially, Kalfa et al. (2018) attributed this outcome to academics' illusio, their deep, often unconscious commitment to the academic game, which neutralised collective resistance by setting colleagues in competition with one another.

The performative character of compliance-driven QA is explained through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, which conceptualises social interactions as staged performances managed for specific audiences. Applied to higher education, this framework suggests that institutions engage in scripted QA rituals designed to project legitimacy to external agencies, without necessarily internalising the values or practices these processes purport to promote (as cited in Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Under bureaucratic pressure, HEIs may resort to what Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) termed "window dressing", presenting polished documentation while concealing deeper structural or pedagogical issues (p. 18). This dramaturgical compliance is not only performative in a neutral sense; it actively twists institutional priorities and communication. The QA discourse that accompanies compliance regimes is often characterised by opaque jargon and hierarchical language, which can alienate academic communities and deepen scepticism about QA's purposes and value. When compliance becomes a performance staged for external audiences, the gap between institutional 'front stage', what is presented to reviewers and accreditors, and 'back stage', the lived reality of academic practice, widens (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007, p. 18). This separation is consequential: it erodes trust between academics and institutional managers, and between institutions and external QA bodies, undermining the credibility of the very systems designed to ensure quality.

4.3.4 Improvement: The most promised, least delivered

Improvement is the most frequently cited purpose of QA, yet it is paradoxically the most contested and the hardest to deliver in practice. Harvey and Newton (2004) were unequivocal on this point: despite the rhetoric, improvement has been a secondary feature of most external evaluation systems, particularly in their early stages.

Compliance and accountability have consistently taken precedence, with any improvement component receiving greater attention only as systems progress to second or third phases of development. This suggests that improvement functions less as a meaningful operational priority and more as a legitimating goal, something QA systems promise in principle but struggle to embed in practice.

The improvement agenda, sometimes framed as enhancement (Williams, 2016), ideally promotes reflection and innovation in teaching, learning, and institutional practices. As Woodhouse (2003) noted, if quality is defined as 'fitness for purpose,' then improvement entails becoming 'more fit for purpose,' ideally through systematic cycles of reflection and innovation. Frameworks such as PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) and ADRI (Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement) are often recommended to guide this process (p. 134). Yet this technocratic framing carries risks, potentially reducing enhancement to formulaic compliance routines in which reflection becomes a procedural exercise rather than a mechanism for meaningful transformation. Harvey (2024c) captured the depth of this disconnect and argued that QA "pretends to be an instrument to improve but, as an improvement tool, it is incompetent: like cracking an egg with a steamroller" (p. 365). This metaphor summarises a recurring criticism in the literature: QA systems were designed for compliance, not for the kind of careful, context-specific work that improving teaching and learning actually requires.

The tension between improvement and accountability creates one of the central paradoxes within QA. Harvey (2024a) characterised this relationship as "a tug of war", not as complementary objectives on a shared continuum, but as separate and often conflicting forces pulling institutions in opposing directions (p. 158). When accountability demands predominate, these demands consume institutional energy and attention, leaving little room for the reflective, risk-taking practices that meaningful improvement requires.

Harvey and Newton (2004) highlighted that the most effective improvement occurs when external processes align with internal enhancement activities, particularly at the learning–teaching interface. However, they acknowledged that external review finds it far easier to engage with institutional structures than with the complexities of pedagogy itself. Drawing on Horsburgh's (1999) longitudinal study exploring whether external quality processes contribute to meaningful impacts in classroom learning, they noted that the factors most directly affecting student learning, how teachers support student learning, and the assessment practices they employ, are largely untouched by external quality processes (as cited in Harvey & Newton, 2004). Harvey and Newton (2004) concluded that "most impact studies reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience" (p. 157). Where changes to the student experience have occurred, they are just as likely to have resulted from factors other than external quality monitoring, with external evaluation at best providing legitimation for changes already driven from within.

Anderson's (2006) research reinforced this previous point, finding that "several academics argued that while they found the qualitative element of student evaluation of teaching useful, their universities were only interested in the statistical elements of student evaluation" (p. 168). This favouring of quantifiable metrics over pedagogical feedback demonstrates how accountability logics systematically crowd out the kinds of evidence most useful for improvement. The result, as Harvey (2022) intentionally asked, forces a deep consideration: "What has quality assurance really achieved if it hasn't improved student learning?" (p. 3).

Research conducted across diverse global contexts reveals a recurring finding. Academics generally support the principle of quality improvement but remain deeply sceptical about QA's capacity to deliver it (e.g. (Akalu, 2016; Jones & De Saram, 2005; Rosa et al., 2012; Watty, 2003). Significantly, this scepticism stems not from resistance to change itself, but from a misalignment between how academics understand quality and how QA systems operationalise it. In Portugal, Rosa et al. (2012) found that academics strongly favoured QA systems oriented towards improving teaching and learning processes, developing professional competences, and strengthening links between teaching and research. Yet the gap between this objective and the compliance-heavy reality of QA practice remained evident. In Hong Kong, Jones and De Saram (2005) showed how "the administrative demands of overall systems can actually subvert what should be the essential foci on quality in teaching and learning", resulting in academics' scepticism" (p. 51) They observed that while it is relatively straightforward to design QA systems on paper, producing a situation where staff engage with them "in an authentic and energetic manner is much more difficult" (p. 48).

In Ethiopia, Akalu (2016) found that academics strongly believed that quality should serve improvement rather than accountability. This reinforces the gap between what academics expect QA to accomplish and what it prioritises in practice. This tension is far from new. Reflecting on over a decade of quality processes, Watty (2003) found that various studies "failed to find any evidence that a majority of academics at the local or departmental level of universities are embracing quality-change initiatives" (p. 218). She argued this was not because "academics are inflexible, resistant to change and ignoring the quality agenda in higher education. It may be that academics conceive quality differently to these other stakeholders, valuing different aspects to those measured and monitored under the current quality régime" (p. 220). This conceptual misalignment is significant: when QA systems define quality primarily in terms of fitness for purpose while academics understand it as transformation, improvement-oriented policy rhetoric will inevitably fail to resonate with those closest to the teaching and learning process.

Beyond attitudinal and conceptual barriers, several structural features of QA systems further limit their capacity to foster genuine improvement. Vettori (2023) introduced a chronopolitical perspective, arguing that QA's fixed cycles and rigid schedules rarely accommodate the time required for meaningful institutional improvement. Real pedagogical change is slow, iterative, and context-dependent; it does not conform to predetermined timelines imposed by external review cycles. At a systemic level, QA frameworks have tended to drift away from their stated focus on teaching and learning toward organisational processes and governance structures (Beerkens, 2018; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). This institutional drift dilutes the improvement agenda, redirecting attention from the classroom, where the most consequential aspects of educational quality are experienced, towards managerial and procedural concerns that are easier to audit but less directly relevant to student outcomes.

Notwithstanding these challenges, a more constructive body of research suggests that improvement can be realised but only under specific conditions that current QA systems rarely provide. Filippakou and Tapper (2008) contended that “quality enhancement can only blossom in the context of a flexible, negotiated evaluative model” (p. 92). This implies that the standardised frameworks that drive most external QA are poorly suited to the flexible, exploratory work required for improvement.

A key element of such an environment is the protection of academic freedom, which has recently received renewed attention in research as a crucial prerequisite for quality improvement (Ashraf et al., 2024; Romanowski & Karkouti, 2022; Wang, 2014). Rosa et al. (2012) also proposed that QA should not only improve existing practices but also actively seek innovation, an innovation purpose that Portuguese academics strongly endorsed but that control-oriented mechanisms frequently stifle. Yet as Harvey (2024a) underlined, when academic staff work within restrictive QA systems that prioritise compliance and control, opportunities for such innovation and meaningful improvement diminish. Conversely, Pham’s (2018) Vietnamese case study revealed the consequences of the absence of this freedom. The lack of institutional autonomy was identified as a key barrier to improvement, with forced accreditation producing only superficial compliance rather than change. She concluded that as long as the university perceived accreditation as imposed, it would continue to engage in apparent compliance rather than meaningful improvement.

4.3.5 Emerging QA outcomes

While the dominant purposes of QA, namely accountability, compliance, control, and improvement, have attracted the most sustained attention, the literature also points to a set of functions that QA systems have come to serve in practice. These functions were not always part of QA’s original design. Instead, they have emerged gradually as QA has expanded in scope, become embedded in institutional life, and responded to the changing demands of increasingly competitive and global (Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Harvey, 2024a; Rosa et al., 2012; Stensaker, 2003, 2008). Recognising these emerging outcomes reveals that QA does not operate in a single dimension. It simultaneously functions as a regulatory tool, an information system, a driver of organisational change, a platform for institutional communication, and a mechanism for reputational positioning, though not all of these functions are equally valued, and some carry unintended consequences.

In research undertaken on behalf of the Programme for Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Brennan and Shah (2000) examined 29 institutions across 14 countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and diverse European contexts. They found that QA serves a range of functions that go well beyond accountability and improvement. These include informing students and employers about institutional quality, encouraging competition among providers, conducting quality checks on new or private institutions, assigning status within a diversifying sector, promoting student mobility, and supporting international comparisons. Their analysis highlighted that QA, in practice, serves as an infrastructure for information and classification, functions that have become increasingly important as higher education has massified and internationalised.

Stensaker (2003) identified increased transparency as a key outcome of external quality monitoring, arguing that external QA evaluations help open up what had previously been a "black box" of academic processes, making institutional activities more visible, measurable, and publicly accessible (p. 155). On the surface, this transparency serves democratic purposes through enabling students, employers, and the public to make more informed judgements about the quality of higher education provision. However, Stensaker (2003) also identified a significant tension within the transparency agenda. More visibility does not translate into meaningful engagement or quality improvement. Instead, increased transparency makes activities at the department and programme level more exposed to institutional and governmental interference and may foster what Stensaker (2003) described as a state of "institutional trance", a condition in which external pressure produces superficial compliance rather than meaningful organisational change (p. 156). In this sense, transparency functions less as a driver of improvement and more as a mechanism of accountability that HEIs learn to perform, responding to external quality monitoring in predictable ways while leaving core practices largely undisturbed.

In a subsequent study, Stensaker (2008) examined the institutional effects of QA, moving beyond questions of direct academic impact to consider how QA reshapes organisational structures and cultures. He identified four main categories of outcome: changes in power distribution, increased professionalisation of administrative roles, enhanced public relations functions, and institutional permeability. With respect to power, Stensaker (2008) observed that QA processes tend to centralise decision-making and strengthen institutional leadership, as quality-related responsibilities become increasingly concentrated at senior management level rather than distributed among academic staff. With respect to professionalisation, QA has formalised procedures through written documentation, reporting systems, and rule-driven handbooks. These developments, while bringing organisational change and strategic capacity, risk creating bureaucratic layers between academic staff and the core activities of teaching and learning. This administrative burden is a concern identified in various studies conducted around the world, with findings consistently showing that academics regard audit-related paperwork as time-consuming, disconnected from actual teaching practice, and a significant source of professional frustration (Cheng, 2009; 2011; Hariri; 2021; Saeed, 2018).

Stensaker (2008) further noted that QA increasingly functions as a tool for institutional positioning and public relations. In competitive higher education markets, the capacity to demonstrate quality, through accreditation status, audit outcomes, or performance indicators, has become a form of reputational capital, with HEIs investing in QA not only to satisfy regulatory requirements but to signal credibility to prospective students, international partners, and funding bodies. This communicative function enhances the visibility of institutional performance and serves legitimate public information purposes. However, it raises important questions about whether QA's outward-facing role is oriented towards meaningful transparency or towards impression management. When QA becomes primarily a vehicle for institutional branding rather than educational improvement, the distinction between accountability and marketing becomes difficult to sustain, and the risk of the performative compliance that Stensaker (2003) earlier described as "institutional trance" reasserts itself (p. 156).

Beyond its function as reputational capital, the convergence of QA practices across HEIs can also be understood through the lens of institutional isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983, as cited in Istileulova, 2018) argued that organisations operating within the same organisational field tend to become structurally and procedurally more similar to one another over time, not necessarily because homogeneity improves performance, but because conformity to shared norms confers legitimacy. They identified three mechanisms driving this process: coercive isomorphism, resulting from formal and informal pressures exerted by regulatory bodies, governments, or other organisations on which an institution depends; mimetic isomorphism, whereby organisations facing uncertainty model themselves on peer institutions perceived as more successful or legitimate; and normative isomorphism, which is transmitted through professionalisation, including the standardising effects of professional networks, accreditation bodies, and shared training pathways (Istileulova, 2018). While this accounts for structural convergence at the institutional level, it does not capture how individual academics respond to QA once such systems are in place.

At the individual level, Rosa et al. (2012) found that academics' support for QA purposes was uneven, with improvement and communication attracting the strongest agreement, while control and motivation received notably lower levels of support. This points to something more specific about how academics relate to QA. Academics are not uniformly resistant to quality processes, but rather selectively engaged with them depending on whether those processes align with their professional values and sense of educational purpose. Rosa et al. (2012) observed that a QA system is unlikely to meaningfully influence academic conduct unless it visibly promotes what academics regard as the central functions of higher education, namely teaching and learning. When QA is experienced as disconnected from academics' core responsibilities because of bureaucratic demands or external control mechanisms it often leads to disengagement or resistance. Conversely, when QA is perceived as supporting meaningful educational development, fostering institutional reflection, or enabling innovation in teaching and learning, it is more likely to be supported. Academics expressed a clear belief that QA should actively support the search for new methodologies for teaching and learning and new ways of linking teaching and research within institutions (Rosa et al., 2012). This suggests that the most legitimate form of QA, in academic eyes, is one oriented not towards surveillance but towards educational advancement.

4.4 QA Implementation in MENA: Outcomes and challenges

Over the past few decades, MENA HEIs have increasingly prioritised QA mechanisms to meet global benchmarks and compete in the international educational marketplace. Higher education in the MENA region has undergone significant expansion, with increases in both the number of HEIs and enrolment rates. Due to this expansion, all economies in this region underwent reforms of their higher education systems in the name of global economic competitiveness, yet they pursued distinct reform models with different implications for the government's role in structuring youth opportunities (Buckner, 2011). Buckner (2011) identified three reform strategies in the region: neoliberal, quality assurance and imported internationalisation, based on the extent to which economies in the region are privatising the provision of higher education at different levels and the types of private institutions being established.

The QA strategy, adopted by Maghreb economies, represents a commitment to QA frameworks. The Maghreb economies of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco emphasised the importance of the government in providing higher education while pursuing strategies to strengthen the internal and external efficiency of higher education. In addition, the ministries of higher education in these economies have pursued large-scale QA programmes, inspired by the Bologna process, a European initiative launched in 1999 that aims to create a unified higher education area in Europe (Buckner, 2011). This aims to align higher education curricula with European models to facilitate the cross-national mobility of qualifications and labour.

The first coordinated attempts to establish QA systems in MENA emerged in the late 1990s (El Hassan, 2013). At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education in Beirut in 1998, Arab ministers agreed to establish a regional mechanism for QA and accreditation under the auspices of the Association of Arab Universities. This decision marked an important turning point, reflecting the region’s recognition that quality assurance required coordinated regional collaboration rather than isolated national efforts (as cited in El Hassan, 2013). By the mid-2000s, MENA began translating early commitments into formal institutional structures. Similar efforts were made at other Arab Summits, with a 2008 feasibility study on forms of cooperation for QA in higher education across the region's economies, which recommended the creation of an Arab Establishment for Programme QA (AEPQA) (El Hassan, 2013).

In parallel, El Hassan (2013) underlined that several similar and overlapping initiatives at the regional level (p. 78). The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) was launched in 2007 as an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation established in association with the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The Arab Council for QA, established by the Association of Arab Universities, produced institutional framework guidelines for self and external assessment, measurements and general conditions for assessment and accreditation (El Hassan, 2013). Additionally, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO) published its plan for developing education in the region in 2008, which called for establishing standards for quality and academic excellence (Arafeh, 2009). This aims to create mechanisms for exchanging good practices, developing standards, and strengthening cooperation among QA agencies.

A decade after the 1998 conference, MENA countries present a diverse and inconsistent landscape of QA development. Arafeh's (2009) review of all 22 Arab League member countries reveals a significant finding:

> There has been promising progress in a very limited number of countries at different levels, but many are lagging behind. Generally, the efforts are insufficient in today's world of knowledge, competitiveness, rapid transformation and students' increased demand for enrolment. (p. 458)

The significance of this implementation gap is evident in El Hassan's (2013) analysis of quality issues across 20 MENA economies, which identified persistent challenges despite almost two decades of QA establishment across areas such as teaching, student assessment, curriculum, faculty development, and research. For example, teaching in most MENA HEIs remains didactic, with minimal emphasis on developing student independence or critical thinking. Student assessment practices continue to emphasise memory recall of factual knowledge rather than higher-order cognitive skills. Curricula remain outdated and disconnected from labour market needs. Faculty development needs identified in the early 2000s persist largely unaddressed, with widespread deficiency in technology integration and participative teaching techniques. Research productivity remains modest despite the establishment of QA mechanisms theoretically designed to encourage research output.

Given the persistence of these implementation gaps, technology has emerged as another aspect of the QA landscape, offering a potential means of achieving the improvements. Pham et al. (2019) argued that digital innovation associated with Industry 4.0 is reshaping both internal and external QA mechanisms. They stated:

> Digital solutions offer new forms of learning and new modes of learning delivery. However, such technologies also present new challenges to existing quality assurance procedures. Ensuring and improving teaching and learning quality for all HE students are a central challenge for institutions and policymakers. (p. 232)

Al-Ramahi et al.'s (2024) related recent study of Jordanian universities, framed through diffusion of innovation theory, similarly identified immediate benefits associated with technology adoption, including more seamless information-sharing among students and staff and the creation of novel educational experiences, benefits that speak directly to qualities valued by academics and students, such as responsiveness, engagement, and the currency of the learning experience, rather than to QA compliance metrics alone.

Yet the impact of technological innovation is not determined by technology alone. Its capacity to drive meaningful QA improvement is bound by the governance structures that determine how much discretion HEIs have to act on it. QA implementation in MENA higher education faces interconnected structural challenges rooted in centralised governance, progressive bureaucratisation, and the application of standardised frameworks to diverse contexts. El Hassan (2013) emphasised that "Ministries imposed unnecessary rigid controls and their higher education policies do not promote integrated, decentralised decision-making, and greater efficiency" (p. 81). As a result, this creates a governance problem in which institutions lack the autonomy to deliver quality outcomes and implement improvements. standardised QA frameworks imported from international contexts can sit uneasily within the conditions of developing nations. Ehtiwesh and Maousa (2023), drawing on the experience of the faculty of engineering at Sabratha University, found that many faculty members in Libya viewed accreditation as a new and challenging process, highlighting unclear indicators and limited institutional capabilities.

Perhaps the most evident sign of MENA's QA implementation gap lies not in the actions of QA bodies but in the absence of key stakeholders from policy discussions. Despite nearly three decades of QA development across the MENA region, the academic voice, the perspective of those who deliver teaching, conduct research, and shape educational quality, remains notably limited. Recent research examining stakeholder engagement in MENA QA explicitly identifies this problem: while external QA agencies theoretically recognise the importance of stakeholder involvement, many MENA QA bodies specify only a limited set of external stakeholders, thereby restricting the range of key stakeholders needed to enhance academic programmes. The involvement of stakeholders such as employers, alumni, and students has been considered important, yet the most vital stakeholder group, the academics themselves, often remains marginal to QA discourse (Alhamad, 2023).

4.5 QA in GCC: Between imported models and local realities

When considering GCC, its member states, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education over the past three decades. Driven by oil revenues, national diversification strategies, and the ambition to build knowledge-based economies, GCC governments have invested heavily in establishing new universities, attracting international branch campuses, and pursuing global recognition through accreditation and rankings (Chaaban et al., 2025; Romanowski et al., 2018; Romanowski & Nasser, 2010). This expansion has been accompanied by a growing emphasis on QA, with most GCC states establishing national QA bodies and many HEIs actively seeking accreditation from international agencies, particularly those based in the United States and the United Kingdom (Mohamed & Morris, 2021).

However, the models underpinning these QA systems have not been developed indigenously. Rather, they have been largely borrowed from Western higher education, raising questions about cultural fit and educational relevance (Alsaadi et al., 2025). Held at Qatar University on February 27, 2016, Dr. Khalifa AlSuwaidi delivered a keynote speech at the Education in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Educational Creativity and Aspirations Forum. He linked imported Western educational systems to "a penguin in the desert", foreign elements imposed on Arab communities without adequate scrutiny or adaptation, incompatible with the culture and social patterns of the region (as cited in Romanowski et al., 2018). Romanowski (2022a) reinforced this critique, arguing that US-based accreditation in GCC higher education functions as a form of educational neocolonialism, imposing Western norms and practices on institutions operating in different sociocultural contexts. Chaaban et al. (2025), examining how education faculty in Oman and Qatar experience the adoption of CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) standards, found that while many faculty complied with accreditation requirements, they often did so without fully recognising or questioning the cultural mismatch between the borrowed standards and their local educational realities. The importation of QA standards thus carries the risk that QA becomes a compliance exercise oriented towards satisfying external agencies rather than addressing the specific educational needs, cultural values, and developmental priorities of the local context.

An essential consequence of this borrowed approach is the way it shapes academics' experiences of QA. Studies revealed that while QA has strengthened accountability, formalised procedures, and supported international positioning, it has also generated challenges related to centralised governance, administrative burden, and uneven academic engagement (Aburizaizah, 2022, Alaskar et al., 2019; Albaroudi et al., 2025; Al-maawali & Al Siyabi, 2020; Alshahri, 2014; Hariri, 2021). For example, Aburizaizah (2022), examining Saudi public universities, found that ministerial centralisation and bureaucracy typically limit individual institutions' creativity, constraining their academic freedom and autonomy in shaping quality processes. Rather than serving as useful tools for self-reflection and improvement, QA mechanisms become procedural obligations driven by top-down approaches. Although there is limited research on academics' perceptions of QA across the GCC, studies consistently found that academics view QA as a burden due to the increased demands of accreditation and QA processes, associated with increased administrative workloads and excessive documentation requirements that divert academic staff from their core teaching and research responsibilities (Al-Maawali & Al Siyabi, 2020; Alshahri, 2014; Hariri, 2021). Such findings point to a broader gap in the literature, as Miranda (2025) noted that how academic and administrative staff experience and interpret accreditation, particularly in relation to workload, autonomy and professional development, remains underexplored globally, and the GCC is no exception. Within the region, Alaskar et al. (2019) demonstrated that faculty involvement in accreditation processes varies significantly, with engagement often limited to procedural compliance rather than participatory quality enhancement.

The relationship between QA and academic freedom adds a further layer of complexity. Romanowski and Nasser (2010), in one of the few studies to directly examine academic freedom in a Gulf university, found that faculty members hold complex and often contradictory understandings of academic freedom, and that self-censorship is widely practised among faculty in GCC institutions. This finding has significant implications for how QA processes operate in practice. If academics self-censor in their teaching and research, the additional regulatory pressures of QA and accreditation may reinforce rather than challenge this tendency, further narrowing the space for the inquiry and pedagogical innovation that quality improvement requires. Romanowski and Karkouti (2022) extended this analysis, arguing that US accreditation processes dilute academic freedom through standardisation. When standardised learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, and programme structures are imposed through accreditation, they constrain what can be taught and how, operating through the definition of legitimate practice rather than through overt exclusion.

4.6 Concluding comments

In conclusion, the chapter reviews a body of literature on QA in higher education, tracing its conceptual foundations, global implementation, and the debates it continues to generate among academics. Several important insights emerge from this review. First, QA remains a politically and ideologically contested domain. Although these frameworks have attracted sustained attention since their establishment, their acceptance among academic staff remains difficult and often uncertain. Superficial compliance may conceal underlying issues, reflecting ongoing concerns about autonomy, academic freedom, and professional judgment. Second, the centralised governance structures dominant across the GCC tend to compound the challenges posed by borrowed QA frameworks, limiting institutional creativity and reducing QA to a procedural obligation rather than a meaningful means of improvement. Third, while the global literature offers extensive evidence of how academics perceive and experience QA, this body of research is situated in Western contexts, leaving the experiences of academics in the MENA region and the GCC significantly underexplored.

As a result, there is a need for more qualitative research in the GCC and MENA region that provides academics with space to articulate how QA processes, policies, and practices shape their academic lives. Oman presents a particularly relevant case for such an investigation. As a relatively young higher education system that has rapidly expanded and adopted externally influenced QA frameworks, Omani public universities operate within a centralised governance structure where QA policies are driven by the national authority. Yet, despite the pace of these reforms, there is a notable lack of research on how academics in Omani public universities experience these processes and the consequences for their teaching, professional autonomy, and academic work.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Planning and conducting educational research cannot follow simple recipes but is a complex, deliberative and iterative process in which ontological and epistemological matters have to be considered and in which many different kinds of understanding feature.

—Louis Cohen et al., *Research Methods in Education*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of this study. It provides an overview of the philosophical paradigm underpinning my research, the research design, and the methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter also addresses trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations to ensure the rigour and integrity of the research process.

5.2 Research paradigm and approach

Every research study is underpinned by philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and how knowledge can be generated, which in turn shape the methodological choices made by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This section discusses the research paradigm and methodological approach adopted in this study and demonstrates how they align with the research aim and questions. The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm provides the philosophical foundation for my research, considering that academics' perceptions of quality assurance (QA) are socially constructed and context-dependent. This paradigmatic stance leads to the adoption of a qualitative methodology, which enables in-depth exploration of how academic staff interpret and experience QA process, policies and practices within the research context, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS).

5.2.1 Interpretivist-constructivist paradigm

This paradigm is grounded in specific ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape how the research is conceptualised and conducted. Ontologically, the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm assumes that reality is not objective and fixed but socially constructed through human interactions and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that multiple realities exist, shaped by individuals' experiences, cultural backgrounds and other contextual factors. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued there is no single, universal truth waiting to be discovered; rather, realities are constructed by individuals as they engage with and make sense of the context. In the context of my research, QA is not viewed as an objective set of policies and procedures with predetermined outcomes but as a social practice that is interpreted and experienced differently by different academics within the academic context.

Epistemologically, this paradigm assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants, rather than existing independently to be objectively measured (Schwandt, 2000). The researcher cannot stand apart from the research process as a neutral observer but is actively involved in interpreting and making meaning from participants' experiences. This epistemological stance acknowledges that understanding is achieved through dialogue and interpretations recognising that both the researcher and participants bring their own perspectives, experiences and cultural background to the research interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm is appropriate for this research for several interconnected reasons. First, the study's focus on academics' perceptions requires an approach that recognises the subjective nature of experiences and meaning-making. QA policies and practices do not have a single, objective impact on academic work; instead, they are interpreted and experienced differently by different academics depending on their disciplinary backgrounds, career stages, institutional roles and personal values (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Second, the Omani higher education context adds layers of complexity, as discussed in Chapter 2. Oman's educational context is influenced by policies borrowed from other countries, which influence how academics understand and respond to QA mechanisms, many of which are adopted from Western models (Al'abri, 2015; Alsaadi et al., 2025). As Schwandt (2000) argued, interpretivism insists on understanding phenomena within the context and recognises that meaning cannot be separated from the context.

Third, QA in higher education is not just a technical or administrative process but also a social practice, and academics' perceptions of QA are shaped by their academic autonomy, their relationships with institutional management and their beliefs about the purpose and role of QA in higher education (Cheah et al., 2023; Saarinen, 2010). The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm enables this research to explore these social dimensions, understanding quality assurance as it is lived and experienced by academics rather than as it exists in policy documents. Fourth, the limited existing research on academics' perceptions of QA in the Omani context necessitates an exploratory approach rather than being focused on testing predetermined hypotheses. The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm supports this exploratory stance and allows the research to be guided by what emerges from participants' responses rather than being constrained by prior expectations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, this paradigm supports the use of qualitative methods that enable rich, detailed exploration of participants' experiences and the context in which they are situated, as discussed in the following section.

5.2.2 Qualitative methodology

Given the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm outlined above, a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate approach for this research. Qualitative research is characterised by its focus on understanding social phenomena through detailed in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives and the context in which they are situated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, qualitative approach is characterised by several key features. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis The research focuses on meaning and understanding and typically involves fieldwork, employs inductive reasoning, and produces richly descriptive findings. The qualitative approach aligns with the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm as both emphasise the importance of understanding participants' subjective experience, acknowledge the active role of the researcher in the research process, and recognise the co-construction of knowledge through researcher-participant interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

That decision to adopt a qualitative methodology for this research is also justified by several considerations related to the research aims, questions and context. The research questions guiding this study are exploratory asking how academics perceive QA and what meanings they attach to these processes, policies and practices. Such questions require in-depth exploration and understanding rather than measurement or hypothesis testing (Yin, 2018). Qualitative methods are particularly suited to answering how and why questions that seek to understand processes, experiences and meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Qualitative approaches provide the flexibility to explore emerging themes and insights without being constrained by predetermined variables or hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodological approach guides the specific research design and methods.

5.3 Research design

My research employs an exploratory case study to examine the QA system within a specific educational context, from the perspectives of academic staff. The single embedded case study design is tailored to my institutional context. This research focuses on four branches due to their geographic proximity within the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). Case study research recognises that phenomena cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts (Stake, 2006). By examining the implementation of the QA system, the QA processes the university underwent, and the policies and practices within the university branches, this study aims to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of academics involved in the institution's QA processes, primarily the Institutional Quality Audit (IQA).

As discussed in Chapter 3, UTAS has undergone several QA processes, including the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA), the first phase of the national institutional accreditation process, as well as the General Foundation Programme Quality Audit and pilot projects related to academic qualification listings. While the ISA remains the primary focus of this research, participants may also reflect on their experiences with other QA processes, depending on their involvement and familiarity. This flexibility allows the study to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences.

A key advantage of case studies is their methodological flexibility. They accommodate multiple data collection methods, allowing researchers to examine the case from various angles (Mayan, 2023). This aligns with the broader goals of qualitative research, which prioritise understanding how participants make sense of their experiences and how these interpretations are shaped by their institutional and cultural contexts. Case studies can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory, depending on the research objectives (Flick, 2022; Mayan, 2023; Yin, 2018). This study employs an exploratory design, appropriate for investigating a relatively under-researched area. It seeks to answer “what,” “how,” and “why” questions related to QA implementation, aiming to uncover the lived experiences of academic staff and the challenges they face in navigating these systems.

5.4 Research site

As mentioned earlier, this study is conducted at UTAS, specifically in four branches previously known as the Colleges of Technology (CoTs). These branches offer programmes in engineering, information technology, and business. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that narrowing research sites to those with shared institutional processes improves qualitative analysis. Given my prior experience working in UTAS-Shinas as an academic staff member and head of the QA department, this further facilitated access to the research site. Researcher familiarity with the field enhances access and supports richer data collection (Denzin et al., 2018).

Establishing ethical access to the research site is a foundational step in conducting responsible research (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). In Oman, obtaining the required approvals before initiating data collection is mandatory. For this study, initial approval was obtained through an official letter from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) before approaching the university to access the participants (see Appendix 2). Although approval to undertake the PhD research in this area was obtained through the university management and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MHERI), access to the research site and participants was carefully managed to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines and institutional requirements. To recruit participants, I first sought formal permission from UTAS management, where the research took place, by sending an email (see Appendix 3) and attaching the information sheet (see Appendix 4). Following this request, the UTAS management issued an official approval letter to all involved branches, informing the Assistant Vice Chancellor of its decision to grant participants' access (see Appendix 5). The letter also provided a summary of the study, confirmed that there were no objections to its conduct, and assured support in facilitating smooth procedures should any additional details or assistance be required.

5.5 Research participants

Qualitative research typically focuses on the depth of insight provided by participants rather than the number of participants in the study. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasised, the goal of qualitative research is to gather broad and meaningful data, something that can often be achieved with a smaller, well-chosen sample who are willing to participate. This approach helps ensure that participants bring a deep understanding of the issues being explored, allowing the researcher to capture various perspectives that contribute significantly to the overall findings. The appropriateness and adequacy of the sample are thus considered more important than its size, aligning with the qualitative research paradigm (O'reilly & Parker, 2013).

5.5.1 Sampling strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich data and perspectives on QA policies and practices. Purposive sampling formed the foundation of the participant selection strategy, ensuring the inclusion of academics with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, career stage and levels of involvement in QA activities (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball sampling was incorporated as a complementary strategy to identify academics who were particularly immersed in or knowledgeable about QA processes. As Palinkas et al. (2015) explained, snowball sampling (also called chain referral sampling) involves asking initial participants to recommend other participants with relevant QA experiences and valuable insights. The use of snowball sampling was especially appropriate given that involvement in QA varies considerably among academics.

The sampling strategy prioritised individuals who were actively engaged in specific QA-related activities. The criteria for participant selection included those who were involved in at least one of the following areas:

- Institutional or departmental QA activities.
- Writing or gathering data for the Institutional Standards Assessment Audit or Piloting Qualification Listing Application.

- Serving as QA coordinators or members of QA committees at the institutional or department level.
- Working as course coordinators, with specific responsibilities tied to QA practices.

Furthermore, employing purposive and snowball sampling strategies enhanced the rigour and trustworthiness of the study (Cohen et al., 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). By selecting participants involved in the university's QA processes, the study ensured that the voices included were based on direct, practical experience. This not only helped ensure the data's relevance but also fostered understanding of how the QA system is perceived and implemented within the institutional context.

Through my professional network and involvement in institutional committees, I gained access to membership lists of academics serving on top-management-level committees at UTAS, including those focused on QA activities and the university merger project. From these lists, I contacted 66 potential participants across four university branches in three different colleges (Computing and Information Sciences, Economics and Business Administration, and Engineering and Technology). Invitations were sent primarily via email (see Appendix 6). However, responses varied; some individuals explicitly declined to participate, while others remained unresponsive despite follow-up invitations. The reasons for non-participation remain uncertain, but several possible explanations can be considered. Some academics may have lacked interest in the topic or felt that they did not have the necessary expertise or experience to contribute meaningfully, leading to hesitation or discomfort about participating. Others may have been concerned about the sensitive nature of the topic and how sharing their views could potentially affect their job security. Additionally, despite sending reminder emails after the initial invitation, the invitation to participate may have been overlooked due to the high volume of institutional emails typically received. It is also possible that ongoing pressures, particularly those related to the university merger project, left potential participants feeling overwhelmed or unable to commit time to the study. A combination of these factors likely contributed to the lack of response. Ultimately, 18 participants agreed to take part in the study. Those who expressed interest were then provided with a more detailed information sheet (see

Appendix 4) to ensure they understood their involvement and to enable them to make an informed decision. This document outlines the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality measures (Wiles, 2013). Additionally, they were allowed to ask questions or request a Zoom meeting for further discussion before conducting the interview. Shortly before the interview, participants were asked to sign the consent form, allowing them to review and reaffirm their agreement before proceeding (see Appendix 8).

5.5.2 Participant characteristics

This study involved nine Omani academics and nine expatriates from diverse national backgrounds (four Filipinos, three Indians, one Pakistani, and one Iraqi). This combination enriched the study by incorporating a range of perspectives on the QA system, shaped by experiences both within Oman and internationally. Many participants had prior work experience in higher education institutions in countries such as South Africa, the Philippines, and India. Additionally, a few participants had professional backgrounds outside academia, contributing insights from sectors such as healthcare. For example, one participant reflected on their role as a technician in a health centre, offering a unique cross-sectoral perspective on QA practices.

All participants were familiar with the university's QA system, although the extent of their direct involvement varied. While many had longstanding experience with these procedures through administrative and academic roles, a few indicated limited exposure to the QA system. Participants described their experience as occurring at the department and institutional levels, and across both contexts. Their experiences covered the following areas:

- Drafting Institutional Self-Assessment (ISA) applications and working with standards ranging from 1 to 5, based on their expertise and committee roles.
- Membership in QA-related committees overseeing policies, health and safety, curriculum development, and institutional governance.
- Experience working within the QA department, holding both academic and non-academic roles before transitioning to other positions.

- Serving as QA coordinators within their academic departments, acting as liaisons between management, QA departments, and academic units.

This diverse range of roles ensured the study captured a broad range of perspectives on QA. As shown in the Table 2 below, many participants had between 10 and 15 years of experience in their respective fields, contributing to well-rounded and insightful discussions on QA implementation.

Table 2

Participants' Details

University Branch	Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience
Branch 1	Faris	Male	5-10 Years
	Jalal	Male	10-15 Years
	John	Male	15-20 Years
	Moeen	Male	10-15 Years
	Sahar	Female	5-10 Years
Branch 2	Abeer	Female	5-10 Years
	Mahdi	Male	10-15 Years
	Nasim	Female	0-5 Years
	Rania	Female	10-15 Years
Branch 3	Adil	Male	15-20 Years
	Anwar	Male	10-15 Years
	Bharat	Male	10-15 Years
	Noor	Female	5-10 Years
	Zahra	Female	5-10 Years
Branch 4	Aliya	Female	10-15 Years
	Faiz	Male	15-20 Years
	Malik	Male	5-10 Years
	Taher	Male	10-15 Years

To protect participants' confidentiality and identities, university branches were referred to as Branch 1, Branch 2, Branch 3 and Branch 4. These numerical designations were randomly assigned and do not reflect any specific ordering or geographical location.

Pseudonyms were also used throughout the findings. No identifying information, such as the specific academic departments to which participants belonged, was included. Additionally, job titles that could be linked to particular departments and potentially reveal a participant's identity were deliberately omitted. These measures were implemented to maintain confidentiality and align with the ethical research standards discussed in detail later in this chapter.

5.6 Data collection methods

Consistent with the qualitative methodology and exploratory case study design, semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while providing flexibility to probe emergent themes (Clark et al., 2021; Mayan, 2023; Naz et al., 2022). This method is particularly suitable for capturing participants' diverse and subjective experiences in implementing the QA system within the UTAS context. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in addressing aspects that are relevant to individual participants while enabling a deeper understanding of the research questions (Clark et al., 2021; Yin, 2016). This method is also beneficial for answering 'why' and 'how' questions regarding the impact of QA policies and processes on academic work. Unlike structured interviews, which may limit responses, semi-structured interviews allow for clarification, elaboration, and reflexivity, ensuring a diverse exploration of participants' viewpoints (Pessoa et al., 2019).

In addition to interviews, this study incorporated document research as a supplementary data source. While not involving a detailed document analysis, this approach entails reviewing some relevant documents to provide contextual background and support findings from the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morgan, 2021). Document research is widely recognised as a valuable method in qualitative studies, particularly for triangulating data and enhancing the credibility of research findings (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2022; Prior, 2003). As Flick (2022) highlighted, documents serve as stable and retrievable sources of information that offer insights into institutional practices, historical developments, and policy decisions.

5.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

As discussed earlier, semi-structured interviews were chosen for their balance of structure and flexibility, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on QA policies and processes. Interviews offer a valuable means of accessing not only participants' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives, but also their descriptions of events, lived experiences, and the contextual factors and structures that underpin the world (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The following sections detail the interview structure, mode, language considerations, duration, and transcription process.

5.6.1.1 Interview structure and questions

The semi-structured interviews consisted of nine main questions (see Appendix 7) organised around a carefully designed interview guide. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, non-leading and experience-focused, inviting participants to share in-depth responses. The interview guide also incorporated probes and prompts to encourage deep elaboration and clarification when needed (Kallio et al., 2016; Naz et al., 2022). The interview guide was developed through several stages:

1. **Literature review**: Key themes and concepts on QA in higher education informed the initial question aspects.
2. **Research questions alignment:** Interview questions were explicitly mapped to the study's research questions to ensure that data collection would address the research aims.
3. **Pilot testing:** The interview guide was piloted with two academics (not included in the final sample) to assess clarity, timing and comprehensiveness. Feedback from pilot interviews led to refinements in question wording and sequencing.

While the interview guide provided structure, its implementation remained flexible. As a reflexive researcher, I developed additional follow-up questions spontaneously based on participants' responses. This flexibility is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study and the semi-structured interview approach (Clark et al., 2021). Such openness was often encouraged by assurances of anonymity, which helped create a safe, trusting environment in which participants felt more comfortable discussing specific experiences (Robinson, 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all participants were equally forthcoming; some responded cautiously, generalising their answers or avoiding specifics in order to withhold more personal or potentially revealing information.

5.6.1.2 Interview mode and platform

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom. This approach was chosen for two key reasons. First, the geographic distance between New Zealand and Oman made virtual interviews the most practical and efficient way to engage with participants. Conducting the interviews online eliminated logistical challenges related to travel and scheduling, ensuring broader accessibility (Archibald et al., 2019). Second, online interviews have become increasingly common and acceptable in qualitative research, offering greater flexibility and confidentiality, making them more suitable for this type of research (Archibald et al., 2019). Academic staff often have demanding schedules, and virtual interviews allowed them to participate at a time and location that best suited them (Gray et al., 2020).

Furthermore, online interviews provided an added layer of privacy in this study, which is particularly important for academic staff working in shared office spaces. Many faculty members do not have private offices and instead work in shared spaces with five or more colleagues, which can make confidential discussions challenging. This lack of privacy in physical work environments may discourage open conversations, particularly on sensitive topics related to QA processes and institutional policies. The online format allowed participants to speak freely without concerns about being overheard, ensuring greater confidentiality and encouraging more frank responses (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). To ensure effective virtual interviews, participants received clear instructions for accessing the platform in advance. Technical checks were conducted at the start of each session, and video was enabled with participants' permission to maintain visual connection and observe.

5.6.1.3 Language considerations

The interviews were conducted in English, as this is the primary medium of instruction at the university. All participants demonstrate high English proficiency in their academic roles, which ensured that language barriers did not affect the data collection process. While initial consideration was given to participants (particularly Omani participants) switching to Arabic for comfort, all interviews were conducted exclusively in English. This linguistic consistency facilitated a smoother transcription and analysis process, eliminating the need for translation while ensuring the authenticity of participants' expressions (Al-Amer et al., 2015).

5.6.1.4 Duration and participant involvement

On average, the interviews lasted about an hour, with a range of 30 to 90 minutes depending on each participant's familiarity and experience with the topic. While a few participants engaged deeply, offering detailed and reflective responses, others provided more concise answers without extensive elaboration. These variations in response styles may reflect personal communication preferences rather than a lack of engagement. However, in the context of discussing the QA framework, processes and institutional policies and their impact on academic work, some participants might have been guarded in their responses due to concerns about job security or potential repercussions (Denzin et al., 2018). The sensitive nature of the topic, particularly discussions surrounding a government-developed system and institutional accountability, may influence how openly participants shared their views. Concerns about professional repercussions, institutional scrutiny, or the potential impact on job security may lead some participants to moderate their responses and avoid directly critiquing policies.

Additionally, given that I am affiliated with the academic environment, participants might have been mindful of how their responses were perceived, opting for guarded or neutral statements rather than openly criticising existing policies (Denzin et al., 2018). The online format, while offering flexibility and confidentiality, may also contribute to this outcome, as participants may have been aware of the recording process despite reassurances of anonymity.

5.6.1.5 Recording and transcription process

All interviews were recorded using Zoom, with transcription facilitated through Otter Premium. At that time, Otter was used solely for generating verbatim transcriptions, without employing any AI-assisted features such as automated summaries, insights, or content analysis. The use of automated transcription software significantly improved efficiency, allowing for rapid processing of interview data. However, while tools like Otter are valuable for initial transcription, they may struggle to accurately capture expressive elements such as emphasis, tone and intonation (McMullin, 2023; Point & Baruch, 2023). Automated systems can misinterpret technical terminology, accents, or overlapping speech, potentially leading to transcription errors that compromise data accuracy and misrepresent participants' intended meanings (McMullin, 2023; Point & Baruch, 2023).

To enhance credibility and ensure data accuracy, I conducted a thorough manual review of each transcript by cross-checking it against the original audio recordings. This process enabled the correction of misheard words, missing phrases, and contextual misinterpretations, ensuring that participants' statements were accurately represented. Additionally, careful verification helped preserve subtle variations in speech, which are crucial for understanding emphasis, hesitation, and emotional expression in participant responses (McMullin, 2023; Point & Baruch, 2023). By integrating automated and manual transcription methods, I maintained data integrity while leveraging the efficiency of digital transcription tools.

5.6.2 Document research

Given the interpretive nature of my research, the document research, as discussed earlier in this section, serves as a supplementary data source and a complementary tool to support various stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as the writing of the findings and discussion. As a secondary data source, documents provide contextual depth, enabling a broader understanding of the institutional and regulatory landscape in which QA processes, policies and practices operate. These documents, ranging from governmental documents, QA frameworks, audit reports, institutional policies and university annual reports, are not merely static records but active agents that shape and influence institutional interactions and decision-making processes (Prior, 2003, 2008). By incorporating document research, I aimed to generate rich descriptions and thorough interpretations of specific events, QA frameworks, and regulatory institutional mechanisms related to QA in higher education (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2016).

To ensure relevance and methodological rigour, document selection was guided by an evaluation process that assesses each document's credibility, authenticity, and relevance. Given the large volume of available online and institutional documents, careful consideration was necessary to identify sources that directly contribute to addressing the research focus and findings. The selected documents included official reports from the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), as well as university-specific policies, strategic plans, and QA manuals. These documents provide insight into how QA frameworks are operationalised at both the national and institutional levels, offering a structured basis for analysing policy implementation, institutional compliance, and reported analysis and findings.

5.7 Data analysis method

This section describes the analytical approach employed to make sense of the rich qualitative data generated through interviews. Data analysis in qualitative research is an iterative, reflexive process of organising, interpreting and making meaning from data in order to identify themes, and insights that address the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis process in this study prioritises emergent themes and unexpected insights, consistent with the exploratory nature of the research and the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm underpinning the study.

5.7.1 Thematic analysis approach

This study used thematic analysis as its main analytical approach. Thematic analysis is a flexible, accessible method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). It is particularly appropriate for exploratory research seeking to understand participants' experiences, perceptions and the meanings they attach to the QA system. Unlike some qualitative methods linked to specific theoretical frameworks, thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and can be applied within different paradigms and epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This flexibility made it appropriate for this interpretivist-constructivist study focused on understanding academics' socially constructed perceptions. Furthermore, thematic analysis focuses on identifying patterns of meaning across a dataset, which aligns well with this study's aim to understand common themes and variations in how academics receive QA in higher education (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis also provides sufficient structure to ensure rigour while remaining open to unexpected findings, making it suitable for exploratory research where predetermined categories might constrain discovery (Terry et al., 2017).

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely recognised six-phase framework for thematic analysis, adapted to the specific context of this research. Figure 8 below summarises the six-phase thematic analysis framework.

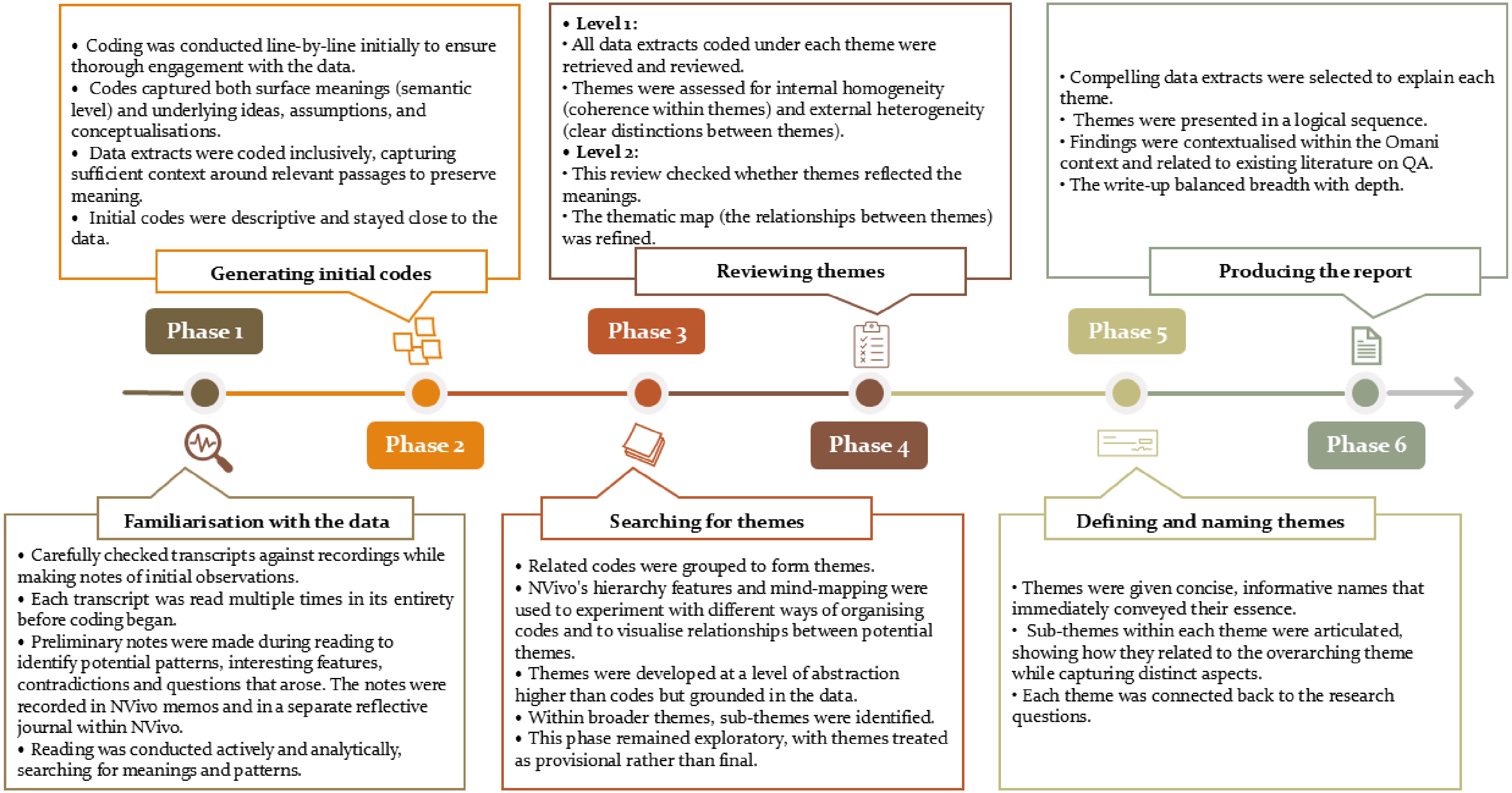
5.7.2 Data management and use of NVivo software

All data collected in this study were securely stored in a password-protected online database to ensure confidentiality and prevent unauthorised access. To facilitate a structured and systematic approach to data organisation and analysis, I received formal training in NVivo through the University of Waikato, which enabled me to make efficient use of the software's capabilities for good qualitative analysis. Effective data management is essential in qualitative research to organise, store and retrieve data efficiently while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring analytical transparency (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

All transcribed interviews were uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the coding process. NVivo is widely recognised for its ability to efficiently manage large qualitative datasets and support various coding and thematic analysis techniques (Adu, 2019; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Silver & Lewins, 2014). While the recent version of NVivo incorporates AI-assisted features, the version used in this study (accessed through the University of Waikato) does not include AI-assisted analytical

Figure 8

Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six-Phase Thematic Analysis Framework Applied in this Study



features. All coding, interpretation and analysis decisions were conducted manually. Given the qualitative data in this study, NVivo helped in the following:

- Organise and structure qualitative data (interview transcripts), allowing for coding and theme development.
- Provide easy retrieval of coded data, which is essential for revisiting and refining themes throughout the analysis process.
- Support the creation of hierarchical themes and subthemes, enhance the depth of analysis and ensure contextually rich interpretations. This structured approach aligned with the inductive strategies employed in this study, ensuring that themes emerged naturally from the data.
- Create and manage different folders corresponding to various stages of analysis, beginning with initial coding and progressing towards more refined and concise themes.
- Improve efficiency during both analysis and writing stages, reducing manual efforts in handling large datasets.

5.8 Research quality

Research quality is a significant aspect to be discussed; there are several criteria and strategies that can be used to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and rigour of qualitative research (Flick, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 2011; Tracy, 2010). Although various strategies were implemented throughout this research, as previously discussed, this section sheds light on the most significant aspects and strategies that contribute to the study's quality.

5.8.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is central to ensuring quality in qualitative research. This study employed many interconnected strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. A number of those strategies within data collection and analysis were embedded in the research to establish trustworthiness. Yet member checking and reflexivity were two main strategies used to ensure trustworthiness.

5.8.1.1 Member checking

Member checking was employed as a primary strategy to establish credibility in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify member checking as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314), as it allows participants to verify the accuracy of data and confirm that interpretations represent their experiences and perspectives. For this study, interview transcripts were shared with participants to verify accuracy and allow for clarifications or additions. As part of the member checking process, participants were emailed their interview transcripts for review and accuracy verification, along with a release form confirming their consent (see Appendix 9 & 10). All participants confirmed that the transcripts accurately reflected their views, with no requests for modifications. This affirmative response reinforces the authenticity of the data and minimises concerns about misinterpretation of participants' perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015). Additionally, member checking fosters a collaborative research process, empowering participants by acknowledging their role as co-constructors of knowledge rather than mere subjects of inquiry (Harvey, 2015). Beyond ensuring accuracy, member checking also contributes to the overall rigour of qualitative research by strengthening the reliability of findings (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015).

5.8.1.2 Reflexivity

As qualitative research is inherently subjective, this study adopted a reflexive research process that integrated both personal and epistemological reflexivity. Reflexivity, as defined by Olmos-Vega et al. (2023), is "a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (p. 241). It involves continuous scrutiny, interpretation, and self-awareness in relation to the research data, participants, and broader research context (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). By engaging reflexively, I aimed to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and rigour of this study, ensuring that the knowledge generated is of high quality while also acknowledging my positionality, values, and biases (Berger, 2015).

Given my dual role as a lecturer and a former head of the QA department at one of the university branches, my perspectives on the QA system and institutional practices have inevitably influenced my research design and analytical lens. While this insider position provides valuable insights into the intricacies of the QA framework and its impact on academic work, it also presents potential challenges of subjectivity and unconscious bias. As Berger (2015) suggested, researcher bias is not inherently negative but must be explicitly acknowledged and managed to avoid distorting participants' authentic experiences. To address this, I actively engaged in self-awareness, self-reflection, and transparency throughout the research process, ensuring that my interpretations remain grounded in the voices and perspectives of the participants rather than solely in my prior assumptions and professional experiences (Finlay, 2012; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Building on the chapter titled *Five Lenses for the Reflexive Interviewer* by (Finlay, 2012), reflexivity in interviews requires ongoing engagement with various aspects of the research interaction. To minimise the influence of my positionality and methodological choice on participants' responses, I incorporated reflexive practices throughout the interview process. First, through the self-lens, I remained conscious of my biases, experiences, and assumptions that may influence how I framed questions and interpreted responses (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2012). Being an insider researcher offers a perspective on how academics perceive QA processes given that I share professional experiences with the participants. Self-awareness allows me to evaluate my role as a researcher and take deliberate steps to mitigate potential biases (Dodgson, 2019). Second, the relational lens guides me in fostering open and respectful relationships with participants, being mindful of power dynamics that might affect their willingness to share honest insights (Finlay, 2012; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Establishing trust and rapport is essential to encourage participants to express their authentic perspectives without feeling pressured by my presence or authority (Mayan, 2023).

Beyond personal and relational awareness, I also applied contextual and methodological reflexivity. The contextual lens ensures that I account for social, cultural, and institutional factors that might shape the interview environment, acknowledging how external influences could impact participants' narratives (Finlay, 2012). Additionally, the practical lens enables me to reflect on my questioning techniques, probing strategies, and nonverbal communication to facilitate meaningful, unbiased discussions (Denzin et al., 2018). Lastly, through an ethical lens, I remained committed to upholding the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being, ensuring that ethical dilemmas were navigated with care and transparency (Nowell et al., 2017). By integrating these reflexive practices throughout the interview process, I enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study while ensuring that participants' voices and experiences remain central to the research.

Throughout the phases of data analysis and writing, reflexivity remains essential in shaping interpretations and ensuring transparency in the research process. During analysis, I continuously reflected on how my interpretations are shaped by my positionality, ensuring that I remained open to multiple perspectives rather than imposing my own assumptions on the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, I examined how themes were constructed, questioning whether my categorisations reflected participants' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity extends into the writing process as I navigated how to represent participants' voices while acknowledging my role in shaping the narrative. I remained mindful of language choices, avoiding interpretations that may unintentionally reinforce my own positionality rather than centring participants' lived experiences (Berger, 2015). To enhance credibility, I incorporated participant quotes where possible to show key themes, thereby foregrounding their perspectives in the analysis. Additionally, I engaged in peer debriefing and sought feedback from supervisors to help ensure that my interpretations were balanced and reflexively considered (Berger, 2015). Through these practices, I aim to uphold the trustworthiness of the research while maintaining transparency about the interpretative nature of qualitative inquiry.

5.8.2 Ethical considerations

This qualitative research involves multiple ethical dimensions, including research design, participant involvement, and data collection. Wiles (2013) provided valuable insights for understanding ethical considerations, particularly in studies involving interviews. This section outlines the two relevant ethical principles that guided this study and the specific procedures implemented to address any ethical issues.

5.8.2.1 Confidentiality

Given the personal nature of the data being collected, confidentiality is paramount for maintaining participants' privacy and integrity in the researcher-participant relationship (Wiles, 2013). To uphold this, pseudonyms were used for all participants to maintain anonymity, ensuring that their identities remained confidential throughout the study. To prevent linking participants to specific nationalities, a list of male and female pseudonyms was offered. The names were selected for their cross-cultural use and commonality across the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Oman, and North Africa. Along with the use of pseudonyms, any identifiable details, such as the names of the university branches or academic departments, as well as demographic data such as age, nationality, and qualifications, were not disclosed. Only generic descriptors of participants' roles in teaching and QA activities were used. Since the university's branches have both male and female academic staff across various functions, the risk of identifying participants was minimised by not specifying gender or personal attributes. Furthermore, because roles in academic and QA positions are rotational, the likelihood of identifying individual participants through their roles in the research was low. Participants' identities were safeguarded throughout the study, ensuring their privacy (Silverman, 2024).

5.8.2.2 Power imbalance

As a current UTAS employee on study leave, I have received initial approval to conduct my PhD research in the QA area, making it relatively straightforward to access documents and compile a list of potential participants. However, ethical concerns regarding power imbalances are particularly relevant given my former position as Head of the QA department. Power imbalances in research, particularly in qualitative interviews, are an ethical concern because they can influence participants' willingness to share information and shape their responses (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Wiles, 2013). To mitigate these imbalances, ethical research practices emphasise fostering a respectful and non-hierarchical dynamic between researcher and participant (Gibson et al., 2014). Considering the measures discussed in the previous paragraphs, I emphasised voluntary participation, ensuring that participants were fully informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage prior to confirming the accuracy of their transcripts without consequences. I also used a conversational and participant-centred approach, allowing interviewees to take the lead in discussions and ensuring that their perspectives guided the interaction rather than being overshadowed by my own assumptions (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Additionally, I engaged in active listening, acknowledged participants' expertise in their lived experiences, and encouraged reflexivity throughout the process. Finally, I provided participants with opportunities to clarify the interview transcripts through member checking (refer to Appendices 9 & 10).

Through these ethical measures, including informed consent forms, detailed information sheets, formal invitations, and strict confidentiality protocols, the study ensures that participants' rights are protected and that the research is conducted ethically and responsibly. Considering all the above discussion points, this study was granted ethical approval (Approval Number: FEDU047/22) from the University of Waikato/ Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 11).

5.9 Chapter summary

This chapter provides information on the methodological framework and research design underpinning this study. Based on an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the study uses an exploratory case study approach with semi-structured interviews and document analysis to explore academics' subjective experiences and perceptions of implementing the QA system within their institutional setting. Purposeful and snowball sampling methods facilitated access to a diverse range of participants with valuable insights into QA experiences, while thematic analysis offered a systematic yet flexible approach to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset. NVivo software supported data management and organisation, although all analytical and interpretive decisions remained my responsibility.

Throughout the research process, attention to trustworthiness through multiple strategies, including member checking and reflexivity, improved the credibility and dependability of the findings. Ethical principles guided every stage of the research, ensuring that participants' rights and confidentiality were protected while their voices and perspectives were respected and accurately represented. Having established this methodological foundation, Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings based on themes identified through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, offering important insights into how academics navigate the QA system and perceive its impacts on their academic work.

CHAPTER 6: NAVIGATING THE QA SYSTEM

When I feel my voice is honestly heard and valued within the quality assurance process, I gain the guts and liberty to openly address challenges and propose solutions, fostering empowerment and open communication.

—A quote by Adil, *A Participant in this Study*

6.1 Introduction

This chapter, the first of the findings chapters, aims to navigate the quality assurance (QA) system within the University of Technology and Applied Science (UTAS). Navigating the QA system involves understanding how participants engage with institutional processes, policies and practices. This chapter presents five key areas, based on the themes that emerged from thematic analysis of the data: academics' conceptions of the QA system, their engagement with the QA policy-making process, incorporation of their voices in QA policies, communication of QA processes and policies and the QA implementation system as seen from diverse perspectives.

6.2 Conceptions of the QA system

Participants were initially asked to share their understanding of QA to explore how they perceived the core concept. Initially, many found it challenging to clearly define QA in higher education. Their responses were often lengthy and somewhat unfocused. As expected, participants would approach QA from different perspectives, mainly emphasising its importance. Some linked QA to specific practices within their departments, highlighting the procedures and standards they followed to maintain quality. Others connected QA with industry standards, drawing comparisons between academic QA processes and those in the commercial sector. In some cases, participants provided theoretical definitions, referring to literature and conceptual frameworks.

John was among the most reflective participants on the topic of QA. He spoke thoughtfully about the concept of QA, emphasising its broad and often subjective nature. For him, QA is not a fixed or universally accepted construct, but one that varies depending on who defines it and their priorities. He explained that different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and even academics within those HEIs, may interpret QA differently, framing it around specific parameters that align with their organisational goals, values, and disciplinary norms.

A dominant theme across participants' responses was the perception of QA as a formalised framework comprising rules, policies, and guidelines. Seven participants described QA as a regulatory mechanism designed to ensure consistency and alignment with institutional standards. Bharat acknowledged that educational activities could occur with or without formal guidelines, but he stressed the importance of having a defined structure. He metaphorically described the absence of a framework as “an unpolished diamond,” in a rough and dull state, lacking its whole shine and beauty, suggesting that quality in education is fully realised only when a clear system is in place. He further elaborated that a framework provides clarity on objectives, steps to achieve them, and the necessary resources, all of which contribute to the attainment of educational goals.

Anwar reinforced this view by highlighting the practical utility of QA frameworks, particularly for new academic staff. He noted that such frameworks provide valuable orientation and support, enabling newcomers to navigate institutional expectations and practices effectively. He also explained that the emphasis on rules and processes reflects a broader institutional culture where accountability and formal mechanisms play a central role in defining and maintaining quality. Complementing this perspective, Faiz and Faris employed metaphorical language to describe QA in more strategic terms. Faiz referred to QA as “a leader,” while Faris likened it to “a compass” that provides direction and support for departmental tasks, including teaching. These metaphors suggest that both participants viewed QA as a proactive mechanism for guiding academic activities and ensuring alignment with institutional goals and standards.

Adil expanded the conceptualisation of QA by describing it as a structured, cyclical process deeply rooted in adherence to externally defined standards. He explained that the initial phase involves aligning institutional practices with the standards set by regulatory authorities. This includes specifying the actions required in various domains, such as procedural implementation, documentation, and the execution of institutional plans and policies. Once these elements are in place, the next phase involves measuring and evaluating the activities and inputs to determine whether HEIs conform to the intended policies and standards. This evaluative step, as he explained, is crucial, as it ensures that what was planned and implemented is not only consistent with institutional goals but also compliant with external expectations. Adil characterised this entire process as “a loop, a process, a cycle,” underscoring his belief that QA should not be treated as a one-off or static activity. Instead, he advocated a continuous and iterative approach in which planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are part of an ongoing cycle. His perspective reflects a commitment to continuous improvement, aligning with quality enhancement paradigms in higher education that emphasise regular feedback, reflection, and adaptation as key to sustaining and elevating academic standards over time.

Consistency emerged as another key theme in defining QA. Rather than viewing QA solely as a means of meeting predefined standards, some perspectives emphasised the importance of delivering reliable, repeatable outcomes over time. This approach aligns with a consumer-focused model of education, where students expect a consistent experience in teaching quality, resources, and institutional support. This understanding is evident in the views of Anwar, Bharat, Faris, and Moeen across all branches. Anwar compared QA to a restaurant experience, where customers anticipate the same food, taste, and service on each visit. His analogy highlighted the expectation of consistency in higher education, where students are increasingly regarded as clients. He further identified key institutional factors such as staff expertise, laboratory maintenance, and salary progression as critical to maintaining quality. Anwar argued that replacing experienced staff with less qualified personnel, neglecting facility upgrades, or overlooking staff welfare would inevitably lead to a decline in quality. His perspective presented a holistic view of QA, in which human resources, infrastructure, and institutional support systems are interconnected and vital to sustaining QA standards.

Faris strongly argued that the QA system promoted consistency in institutional teaching practices, asserting that variability in how individual lecturers delivered content risked undermining teaching quality. He believed that teaching and learning should not be left entirely to individual discretion but instead must be aligned with clearly defined standards. This position reflects a conviction that institution-wide consistency is vital not only for operational coherence but also for maintaining academic standards. Moeen supported this view from a fairness perspective, arguing that consistent teaching practices are crucial to ensuring that all students receive the same level of academic support and service, regardless of the instructor. While the focus on QA's role in fostering consistency offers valuable insights into how quality is defined, it represents only one aspect of a broader, more complex discourse. Beneath these viewpoints lie deeper insights into how consistency interacts with academic practices, autonomy, and pedagogical flexibility. These more diverse perspectives are discussed in the following chapter, which deepens the understanding of the relationship between QA and academic work.

While some participants focused on QA as a system of rules, others conceptualised it in more expansive terms. Sahar, for example, defined QA as a form of accreditation, emphasising its role in achieving institutional recognition. As she stated, "[HEIs'] main concern is to get the accreditation at the end," linking quality directly to the goal of being "known locally, and internationally as well." For her, maintaining "a good standard of quality at the college level or even the university level" was essential to fulfilling the requirements set by the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA).

In line with Sahar's view, Malik, Taher, and Zahra alluded to QA's role in building the university's brand and reputation. They emphasised that being accredited both locally and internationally can enhance the institution's visibility and image, making it a preferred choice for stakeholders and prospective students. Building on this reputational framing, Aliya highlighted that QA also functions as a mechanism for aligning with industry best practices, enabling institutions to evaluate and position themselves within the broader higher education landscape. Rania extended this idea further by explicitly linking QA to benchmarking, depicting it as a structured approach that enables institutions to assess their performance against that of their peers.

Adil, John, and Zahra were the only participants who directly associated their QA perspectives with the concept of continuous improvement. Zahra explained the following:

> QA is a continuous improvement in various processes and procedures of the institution that will ultimately lead to competitive programmes, better learning experiences for students, a better work environment for staff, and active collaboration with industry and other education providers, as well as responsiveness to the needs of the community.

Interestingly, a few participants conceptualised QA through the lens of established business improvement methodologies, reflecting a shift towards structured and performance-driven approaches in higher education. Frameworks such as Kaizen, Lean Management, and Six Sigma, commonly used in industry to promote continuous improvement, eliminate waste, and enhance efficiency, were referenced to explain how QA can serve as a strategic tool beyond compliance. This orientation was evident in the views of Faiz and Bharat. Faiz linked QA to Kaizen, a philosophy focused on incremental, continuous improvement involving all members of an organisation. Bharat associated QA with Lean Management and Six Sigma, both of which emphasise data-driven decision-making and process optimisation. Their perspectives suggest that QA is increasingly understood as part of a broader organisational strategy, influenced by tools such as the Balanced Scorecard, used for strategic planning prior to the university merger, and the implementation of key performance indicators that prioritise measurable outcomes and institutional accountability.

Although some participants recognised QA in higher education as a framework, approach, and form of accreditation, definitions often lacked depth and specificity regarding its purpose. Their responses generally revealed a lack of confidence and hesitancy in defining the term. Some participants described QA in general terms without specifically linking it to aspects of teaching. This could suggest various interpretations, one of which is that participants may have a limited understanding of QA beyond its broad conceptual framework. They may be aware of QA principles in a general sense but may not fully grasp their application to specific aspects of teaching. It may be that participants perceived QA primarily as institutional processes aimed at ensuring compliance with standards, guidelines, and accreditation requirements. Participants' responses regarding the concept of QA in higher education revealed variations in depth and articulation, suggesting different levels of engagement with QA processes.

6.3 Academics' (dis)engagement within the QA policy-making process

To examine academics' engagement in the QA policy-making process, it is essential to consider the university's practices in this area. In accordance with the policy management criterion outlined in the Governance and Management Standard of the Institutional Standard Assessment (ISA) document by the OAAAQA, the university was tasked with establishing and maintaining a policy management system. To meet this requirement, each university branch had a policy management committee that included academics serving as representatives from their respective departments. The committee was responsible for drafting and reviewing policies as necessary. Regular meetings facilitated the drafting and review process, ensuring that policies were evaluated and improved to meet the UTAS needs and goals. Within this committee, academics could offer feedback, consider their department needs, and advocate for necessary policy adjustments to ensure alignment with their departments' requirements and priorities.

Drawing on insights from participants and reflections on the practices employed, the policy formation process typically began with the QA department at the university management level. Some policies were drafted centrally before being shared with the QA departments of individual university branches for feedback and input. Additionally, specific policies were developed and implemented within university branches, enabling customisation and adaptation to specific academic contexts. This approach accommodates variations in procedural needs across university branches and enables responsive adjustments based on feedback from academic staff members. At each university branch, the QA department initially drafted policies and later submitted them to the university's policy committee. This was evidenced in Sahar’s words, highlighting the structured nature of representation and the QA department's central role:

> There are some senior staff; they have been involved in some activities related to the preparation of the procedures and policies. The nomination and selection of representatives are typically handled by the department's management. The preparation of procedures and policies is not done at the department level and must be handled by the Quality Assurance Department itself.

Bharat highlighted the important role of QA coordinators at the department level, who were mainly academics. Drawing on their teaching experience, QA coordinators worked with the university's QA department to develop and influence department policies.

As expected, the analysis showed varying levels of participant involvement in policymaking processes, from active contributions at one end of the continuum to minimal participation at the other. Some participants reflected on the committee procedures and offered feedback based on their experiences. Others acknowledged that their roles were relatively limited in scope. A notable trend was participants' tendency to discuss their involvement collectively, focusing more on shared experiences than on individual contributions. This observed reluctance to engage in self-assessment and critique likely stems from discomfort in evaluating personal roles, behaviours, or biases within the policymaking process.

Adil reflected on his past involvement in shaping university policies, particularly through his senior administrative role, which sought to incorporate input from academics across departments to ensure comprehensive, inclusive policy development. He emphasised that academic staff, who were directly engaged in teaching and learning, possessed unique insights that enabled them to identify loopholes, grey areas, and opportunities for improvement in institutional policies. According to Adil, this frontline perspective was essential for identifying aspects of policy that may be unclear, impractical, or ineffective. Despite these efforts, Adil expressed concern that the value of grassroots participation in policy drafting was not always fully recognised. He advocated a more inclusive, participatory approach to QA that engaged academics at all levels of the institution. As he explained:

> When I feel my voice is honestly heard and valued within the quality assurance process, I gain the guts and liberty to openly address challenges and propose solutions, fostering empowerment and open communication. Conversely, suppose quality assurance is enforced solely as a rigid policy system with excessive police monitoring. In that case, it can undermine autonomy and inhibit willingness to speak up, hindering engagement and problem-solving.

Adil’s reflections revealed a tension between his idealistic beliefs and the practical realities he observed. While he supported inclusivity and bottom-up engagement, he acknowledged the complex interplay between aspirational principles and institutional constraints.

While a few participants explicitly expressed the direct involvement of academic staff in the policy-making process, most participants reported varying degrees of indirect engagement through review processes, providing feedback either before or after implementation. For example, Mahdi expressed, “The policy-making process is done by the QA department, but they will not implement it unless they send the policy they formed for feedback.” Three other participants agreed that academic staff had been given an opportunity to provide feedback on the new policies, especially those related to teaching and learning, before or during implementation. Aliya acknowledged that this approach not only ensured staff awareness of policy changes but also provided a platform for them to voice their opinions and suggest improvements.

Through department committees, Anwar and Nasim’s responses demonstrated that representatives would be involved in the centralised review processes, and that all inputs from these committees had to pass through the QA department before proceeding through multiple levels of approval. Anwar reflected on a specific example related to health and safety policies. He clarified that the committee was responsible for reviewing and revising the related policies before presenting them to the QA coordinator at the department level and the QA department at the institutional level, prior to seeking the approval of the Assistant Vice Chancellor at the Branch. Nasim echoed this structured approach, focusing on examination policies. She highlighted the role of the examination committee head in reviewing policies and recommending modifications. Nasim felt excluded from decision-making in assessments and course coordination. She recounted an instance in which, as a non-coordinator for a course, she felt sidelined, noting that "the course coordinator is preparing the midterm exam, and she is approaching the system without me knowing it." This lack of involvement left Nasim feeling disconnected from crucial decisions that impacted her students. She emphasised the absence of transparency.

Although Rania’s direct role in shaping policy was not explicitly stated, she highlighted opportunities such as workshops, seminars, and brainstorming sessions during which she offered her feedback. Conversely, Faiz explicitly reflected on the shift from creating independent institutional policies to adopting a benchmarking approach informed by other HEIs. According to Faiz, this change reduced academic engagement in policy development. Once policies were finalised, academic staff were only asked to provide feedback through online forms, which Faiz characterised as lacking transparency and meaningful communication:

> Initially, our Institute had decided to create its own policies. However, later, someone suggested that instead of reinventing the wheel, it's better to set a benchmark; why not seek help from some higher education institutions? .... I don't know whether they finalise the policies on their own or if they took help by having some benchmark with other universities, where they used a base from another and then modified it later. I believe I was informed when all the policies were finalised.

Despite these opportunities, some participants expressed feelings of disempowerment and frustration within the QA policy process. They reported that academics were excluded from the QA policy-making process within their respective university branches. For example, Abeer strongly asserted that there were special authorities responsible for policies, highlighting a clear divide between academic staff and those assigned with policy-making authority. Her reference to the Assistant Vice Chancellor at the branch, the Deputy of the Assistant Vice Chancellor, the Head of Departments, and some university members underscores a distinct group responsible for policy development. The absence of academics from this list emphasises their perceived exclusion from this important aspect of institutional governance. Similarly, Faris remarked that "policy formation is done at the top management level," underscoring a hierarchical structure where academic involvement played a secondary role. In this context, 'top management' is a colloquial term commonly used within academic staffing to refer to senior management. While recognising the role of heads of academic departments as potentially involved in policy formulation, he admitted that academic staff generally were not involved. This distinction between policy creators and the broader academic community reflects a clear separation of decision-making power.

Noor also stressed that those higher-level academics, specifically heads of academic departments, may have some input, but decision-making largely took place in university senior management meetings where rules and policies are set. She admitted that she had "never been asked to come and participate in creating a policy." Emphasising the limited role of academic staff in institutional decision-making, she noted, "As academic staff, we operate at the level of execution." This highlights the perception that lecturers are mainly responsible for implementing policies, with minimal involvement in shaping them. Noor emphasised that while decision-making may seem straightforward at the executive level, the implementation process often presented challenges. Jalal's brief response, "No, I think we are not in that field", reaffirms the perception that academic staff had little to no influence in QA policy-making processes. Similarly, John, with extensive experience at the university, expressed disappointment regarding his lack of involvement:

> To be honest, during my time at the university, I have never been involved in policy-making related to QA as well as academic matters. Unfortunately, I have never been asked for input or directly engaged in these aspects.

Those participants who expressed concerns about the lack of academic involvement in QA policy-making also advocated for more inclusive and participatory approaches, reinforcing Adil's earlier point at the beginning of this section. Noor emphasised the importance of staff input during implementation. She highlighted that staff brought diverse perspectives and practical insights that could help clarify the impact of decisions and ensure alignment with operational realities. John expanded on this idea, stressing that policies should not be developed in isolation by the management. Instead, he argued for collaborative planning that includes staff voices. Drawing an analogy, he stated, "It's just like parents and daughters; you cannot plan everything for your children. Let your children be part of your plan." This comparison underscored his belief in shared ownership, further supported by his comment that policies should be "more holistic, not only one-sided, because the administration perspective is different from the perspective of the staff as well." Moeen echoed John's concern, advocating for policymakers to have firsthand experience with the realities of academic work. He argued that those involved in crafting policies should not be confined to administrative offices but should come from the "real world," bringing practical knowledge of the challenges faced on the ground. His view reinforced the need for grounded, experience-based policy-making that reflects the lived realities of those most affected.

Across these varying levels of engagement, participants were given opportunities to provide feedback. However, Faiz emphasised that he did not know exactly what happened "behind the curtain" after the feedback was collected. The use of this imagery raises important questions: Are suggestions and feedback from academic staff effectively incorporated into policies? Do academic staff readily share insights and suggestions? How do they communicate their feedback? Equally important, if sharing is limited, what might be the underlying reasons? The following paragraphs examine the aspects underlying academic staff's views on these policies.

6.4 Academic voices in QA policies: Incorporated or neglected?

Although not directly involved in policy formation, participants explained that they still had opportunities to provide feedback on draft or disseminated policies. Their responses revealed various ways in which academics engage with institutional policies. Participants generally agreed that their feedback often began at the personal level, with academics reflecting on policy implications before raising concerns or suggestions within their departments for discussion at the top level. Yet participants reported that most decisions regarding various aspects of teaching were perceived as originating from senior management.

Nine participants explained how feedback was collected through a hierarchical system within the university. They agreed that there were department discussions that served as a platform to consolidate viewpoints, which were then forwarded to the QA department. At the campus level, the QA team was responsible for collecting, reviewing, and synthesising feedback on specific policies and procedures, ensuring that academic input was considered in policy refinement before sending them to senior management for a decision on whether to incorporate them. Three participants noted that at times, workshops, meetings, or open forums were held to discuss them after these inputs were sent to senior management.

Anwar and Abeer acknowledged that staff feedback was appreciated and carefully considered, emphasising that management listened to their input. However, they also noted that some suggestions were deemed inapplicable. Abeer explained that "some of the details normally are not discussed." Jalal, on the other hand, stated that "academic staff are only on the border of QA, working within those borders." He was trying to convey that although their feedback may be collected, the actual decisions on QA policies were made by the senior management. Aliya reflected on her previous role in managing academics' feedback on policies. However, since she was no longer involved in QA activities, Aliya expressed uncertainty about the current state of feedback assessment:

> I can see how management was reviewing the feedback at that time; every piece of feedback matters. However, since I am no longer with them, I am unsure whether they are actually reading or reviewing it. But there was a time when every feedback mattered.

Although feedback mechanisms were part of institutional QA processes, their impact on policy outcomes appeared to rely on certain conditions. Mahdi, for instance, noted that "comments are appreciated if they are aligned with the ISA requirements; then they will normally follow them." Nasim also observed this:

> From the beginning, I have been reviewing comments with the committee heads. Afterwards, we will meet with the QA department to review the ISA and quality manual to see if any changes are necessary, so we can implement them accordingly.

While decision-making in the QA system usually rested with senior management, there were occasions when feedback from academic staff was meaningfully incorporated into policy development. These instances highlight the importance of engagement, demonstrating that academic voices could influence institutional practices. For example, three participants highlighted that although policies were designed to be comprehensive, practical shortcomings often emerged during implementation. In such cases, feedback was reportedly received constructively, leading to necessary modifications. However, they observed that suggestions were occasionally incorporated during the final stages of policy review, indicating that academic input, while not central to policy formation, could still shape outcomes under specific circumstances.

Commenting on the examination policy, Abeer described a scenario where she attended a meeting in which the policy was amended to permit alternative forms of student identification for exams. This revision directly addressed a recurring issue raised by lecturers: students missing exams due to the strict ID requirements. The change not only resolved the problem but also demonstrated the responsiveness of policy-making to practical concerns from academic staff. Abeer also observed that decision-makers generally responded only when a large number of lecturers collectively suggested changes. This indicates that individual feedback was often overlooked unless reinforced by collective pressure, a requirement dictated by a system in which decision-makers held authority rather than academic staff. As she explained:

> That is why if we have problems, we must sign a paper as lecturers specifying the problem with these policies. We will take the signatures from many of the staff and send them to the head of the section. In this situation, they will consider it, and they will try to change it.

Although participants recognised opportunities to give feedback on policies, some felt their contributions had little effect. John, for example, recounted how his suggestions for enhancing monitoring and audit procedures were overlooked:

> We regularly conduct course filing and advising filing. Based on my experience, I have suggested several improvements to our monitoring and audit processes. However, these recommendations have not been acknowledged or implemented, as they have not been reflected in the manual or policies.

Malik shared a similar frustration, describing a persistent sense that feedback rarely influenced outcomes:

> I feel that the possibility of addressing those comments is very low because it has happened before in many cases for me. We are providing our comments and suggestions, but we feel that nothing has happened or changed. Maybe they believe that whatever they have done is really good. That's why they don't want to make any changes.

Similarly, Moeen reflected on the examination and assessment policy. His comments, which raised procedural concerns, were voiced but remained unresolved from his perspective. He also highlighted how certain policies restrict academic staff, limiting their ability to make context-specific decisions. He underlined this with the attendance policy: "If a student is more than 10 minutes late to a class on three occasions, it is recorded as one class absence." Moeen emphasised that the policy failed to account for legitimate circumstances such as traffic, parking issues, or unforeseen personal matters. Despite these legitimate reasons, academic staff had no discretion to account for individual situations. This rigidity shows that academics are not truly empowered decision-makers. Their professional judgment is limited by strict policies that reduce their ability to shape policies that directly affect their work and students' experiences.

Discussions about feedback also revealed how academics' attitudes shaped their willingness to engage with policy processes. Adil reflected that while he personally felt comfortable expressing his views, many of his colleagues chose to remain silent out of concern for possible repercussions. As he explained, "Those people who have more courage and are more communicative in sharing their ideas are the ones who truly matter, and their voices can be heard. This is the situation I consistently observe." He added that only a small number of academics, often driven by passion, personal goals, or a strong commitment to the educational system, were willing to voice their opinions. For others, especially expatriates, practical considerations overshadowed engagement: "When considering the bottom line, particularly for expatriates, their primary reason for being here is to put food on the table."

This observation is particularly significant in the context where many expatriate academics prioritise job security and income, which may limit their willingness to express opinions. Adil's response suggested that Omani academics, by contrast, might feel a stronger sense of ownership over their academic environment, potentially fostering greater participation in feedback processes. This perspective, however, was not universally shared. John observed the opposite and stated that Omani academics were not, in fact, more engaged with the QA system; their sense of ownership seemed to foster disengagement rather than increase participation. Malik agreed with Adil's point and revealed complex power dynamics that intersected with national identity and job security. He stated:

> The culture is such that staff members are hesitant to be honest or provide negative feedback. Perhaps some Omanis might be willing to give, but I mean, non-Omani, because they are afraid; they're scared. They might think that if I say something negative, then those people at the top might take action against me.

Malik also revealed other possible reasons for the reluctance and hesitation among himself and his colleagues to share feedback on drafted policies. First, he feared that offering comments was often risky because "sometimes when you provide feedback, they may think you are criticising what they have done." This reflects the tension between offering constructive feedback and the fear of being perceived as dissenting, in which academics worry about facing negative consequences for their input. Second, Malik pointed to a lack of anonymity in the feedback process. Since the identity of those providing comments was often known, staff feared possible reprisals or misinterpretations of their motives. This lack of transparency, he explained, created unease and discouraged academics from contributing openly, as feedback may be judged not only on its content but also on who provided it.

Time constraints emerged as another factor limiting academic engagement in policy feedback. Faris, for instance, highlighted:

> Because they ask us all at once to review a number of policies, and this happens while we are actually really busy with the dissemination of assessments, following up on students' teaching preparations in other work, and committee work that we are part of. So, we are so busy that we're not able to give our 100% focus to reviewing those policies, understanding them, and providing our feedback. I feel like many lectures are just on a surface level in their engagement with QA policies, like scanning the policies and then approving them without really considering how this might impact them.

Anwar also addressed the issue of excessive communication as a barrier to providing feedback on policies. He pointed out that the QA department dispatched numerous emails requesting input on various policies and procedures. This deluge of emails, particularly during and at the end of the semester, became overwhelming, leaving inadequate time for a review of each email. Anwar stressed that even if they successfully addressed one email and provided feedback, it became impractical to replicate this process for every communication. He underlined that staff often chose not to engage with policy documents due to their length, perceived irrelevance to individual roles and assumptions of existing familiarity.

The points raised about feedback on policies reveal different views among academics regarding the effectiveness, inclusivity, and responsiveness of the existing feedback mechanisms. Some participants expressed confidence in the system, believing their feedback was valued and acted upon, while others expressed doubts or reservations about the extent to which their input influenced decision-making processes. This range of perspectives underscores the complexity of requesting and effectively incorporating feedback into policy-making and highlights broader themes related to communication and implementation of QA policies and procedures.

6.5 Communication of QA processes and policies: Bridging gaps or falling short?

This section examines the channels and platforms used to communicate QA processes and policies to academic staff, with the aim of keeping them informed and engaged. However, the effectiveness of these channels can vary, and the main challenge is ensuring that communication not only reaches academics but also fosters genuine understanding and commitment to QA practices. The discussion considers whether these efforts bridge gaps between academics or fall short of encouraging meaningful engagement.

Overall, participants felt that communication about QA policies and practices was sufficient. As Adil noted: “Every possible way of communicating and cascading QA information to the academic staff is there.” Almost all participants felt that emails and circulars remained essential for communicating QA policies, procedures, and updates. They valued the direct and targeted nature of email communication for its ability to quickly reach the intended audience. However, John pointed out a significant gap in the communication process, that emails alone were insufficient to foster meaningful engagement and feedback from academic staff. John suggested that discussing policies and plans in staff meetings could be more effective. He noted that "most of the time the plans which are being propagated or shared with the staff are plans only made by the management." This top-down approach, as he described, excluded valuable input from rank-and-file staff, which could otherwise improve the quality and relevance of the plans. By involving staff in discussions and gathering their feedback, John believed the university could develop more effective and inclusive QA policies. His insights highlighted the importance of participatory communication in the development and implementation of QA processes.

In contrast to this, Faris highlighted meetings as another major channel used at both the institutional and department levels to communicate QA processes and policies to academic staff. He explained:

> At the beginning of each semester or academic year, the branch operational plan is prepared, and top management organises a meeting with QA coordinators from different departments. The QA coordinators, who are members of the quality assurance committees at the department level, are responsible for disseminating the operational plan and addressing any questions or confusion.

He further explained that "before sending the department operational plan for approval from the QA department within the university branch, a meeting is held with all academic staff in the department to gather their feedback and address any confusion or questions." This shows differences between branches/departments, indicating a lack of uniformity.

Despite these efforts, Faris recognised limitations in the current approach. He observed that academic staff, due to their workload and administrative responsibilities, often participated passively in these meetings. As he stated:

> Honestly, it's not enough because lecturers, with all the responsibilities they have, with all the work they must do, have little focus on understanding this. So, they just come for the meeting, listen to whatever is being said. And then walk away. This is how it is.

To enhance academic staff's understanding and engagement with QA processes, Faris suggested:

> Perhaps we could have more frequent or smaller meetings. For example, we could put lecturers into focus groups where they sit together to understand everything in the plan. This will ensure that everyone knows

> what is expected of them and of each other. Perhaps this approach can help them understand it better.

This suggests that while the initial dissemination of information through large meetings is a good start, it may not effectively ensure a deep understanding or engagement among academic staff.

Building on Faris's discussion of meetings as a primary channel for communication, two participants highlighted significant gaps in how information was shared within their academic departments. Nasim noted that, although she was kept informed about key decisions, including those involving the Assistant Vice Chancellor, information was often shared selectively: “The head of the department is not sharing the information with the academics; she is sharing only with the QA coordinators.” Similarly, John described minimal communication between the head of his academic department and sectional heads.

> Over several years here, I could count the number of meetings on one hand, maybe fewer than ten. Imagine all these years. So, if the section head will not initiate talks or meetings with the department, we normally just follow all the routine jobs set by the department QA and only provide the evidence.

The role of the QA coordinator in the academic department emerged as a key platform for promoting communication about QA policies and procedures, as noted by most participants. For instance, Taher explained that “QA coordinators are playing a very active role in creating the awareness that was suggested by the QA department members.” Noor also expressed:

> Each academic department has a representative who communicates with the QA department. The QA department relays information to the QA coordinator of each academic department. This coordinator directly informs the Head of Department and section heads. Alternatively, the Assistant Vice Chancellor of each campus sometimes communicates directly with the Head of Academic Departments before reaching the entire staff.

Five participants also highlighted additional communication channels used by their academic departments and the university branch administration to disseminate QA policies and related information. For instance, Anwar, Malik, and Mahdi emphasised that QA policies were easily accessible on the main university branch website, which was open to everyone. Anwar and Malik also observed that the QA policies and other related documents were shared via SharePoint. Adil highlighted the use of shared drives and memos. Anwar mentioned that some policies at the department level were stored on the eLearning platform for easy access by academic staff. Moeen explained that at his university campus, there was a portal system that allowed access to all relevant policies. Once a policy was uploaded onto the portal, staff received an email informing them of the new policy.

A variety of informal methods were also used to disseminate QA processes and activities to academic staff, as mentioned by a few participants. During preparations for the Institutional Standard Assessment Application (ISAA), participants from all university branches recognised the management's efforts to effectively disseminate information about QA processes and implementation through both formal and informal communication channels. However, Faiz introduced a new method and described, "We organised an ISAA gala, which was a kind of event where we hosted various activities. I can also say it was a function involving different games and quizzes, all related to quality and other such themes."

Abeer discussed the weekly practice of awareness sessions held in her academic department to ensure all staff members were well-informed about the various standards and policies. Abeer interpreted the practice as follows:

> We assign one staff member to deliver a presentation quiz about one of the standards, with full attendance from our team. This process is repeated for policies, with one staff member administering the quizzes. Afterwards, the department head shares the results with the team to encourage participation.

To foster a greater sense of community involvement in the university's strategic plan, Faiz also mentioned that the QA department members on his campus ran QA shops as a way to raise awareness through brief informational sessions for both students and faculty. As a result, whenever students or faculty approached, small notes outlining the university's vision, mission, and goals were prepared. Faiz also explained that the university campus utilised WhatsApp groups to facilitate information sharing. He clarified that each standard had its own dedicated WhatsApp group, ensuring relevant QA updates and guidelines were shared with the appropriate audience. Additionally, a core committee maintained its own WhatsApp group, demonstrating a structured approach to communication and collaboration. Faiz remarked, "Those who are involved or who are in charge of QA at that time were sending those messages extensively, I would say that." However, he pointed out the frustration and inconvenience caused by such communication practices, which disrupted people's personal time and boundaries. He sarcastically explained:

> There were instances when academics were contacted early in the morning, even on weekends, while they were still in bed. They would be asked, 'Excuse me, could you please explain what strategy number 4.5.3 entails?' In response, the person would say, 'I can't provide an answer right now because I'm in sleep mode. What kind of question is this?' Consequently, academic staff were instructed to report to the office due to concerns regarding their quality assurance processes.

Although various communication channels were used, half of the participants expressed concerns over the effectiveness and clarity of these communications, especially regarding QA policies and processes. Jalal, Bharat, Mahdi, and Malik highlighted the lack of adequate awareness workshops and training programmes for effectively communicating policies. Jalal, for instance, emphasised the need for more interactive and structured training for new academic staff to better understand QA processes. He argued that "merely sending emails or distributing documents is insufficient for effectively communicating the complex terms and processes associated with QA." He further explained:

> Without proper training, new staff members often struggle to understand QA concepts and have to depend on informal peer learning. There are many terms I did not understand. I need to sit with my colleagues, or those more experienced than me, to learn from their experience.

He pointed out that “this informal learning is inconsistent and those providing the guidance are not specialists, which can lead to gaps in understanding.”

Bharat also supported the provision of training programmes, particularly those aimed at coordinators and committee coordinators designated by university management to execute and participate in QA tasks and activities. He emphasised that these sessions should not be conducted merely to assign tasks, but to ensure that academics understood the purposes behind their actions. Bharat underscored the importance of each academic staff member understanding not only what they were doing but also why, with clear justifications aligned with the university's operational and strategic plans. He advocated for these sessions to be effective training programmes rather than superficial awareness seminars.

Taher and Aliya, both from the same branch, emphasised the importance of effective and inclusive communication in QA processes, with particular focus on openness, clarity, and mutual engagement across institutional levels. Taher proposed that communication should be a two-way process, “mutual and it should be open at all levels," rather than merely delivering directives from higher authorities. He added that communication should not be limited to addressing problems; instead, it should feel like a friendly or social visit. This approach enables academics from various levels to communicate freely, share ideas, and suggest improvements, thereby fostering a more inclusive and engaged organisational culture. In addition to Taher’s perspective, Aliya expressed her belief that there was considerable room for improvement in communicating QA information. She suggested that academics unfamiliar with QA procedures would find it difficult to understand them based on the current communication efforts.

To summarise, participants generally described the communication of QA policies, practices, and related information as positive. They mentioned efforts beyond traditional methods, such as using ISAA gala, QA shops, and even WhatsApp, to inform academic staff. However, despite these actions, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of communication. This suggests that, although they were kept informed, management’s efforts seemed more about fulfilling an obligation to raise awareness rather than ensuring engagement. Merely sending emails or holding meetings was regarded as insufficient; participants stressed the need for more interactive, useful communication to close gaps and promote full understanding.

6.6 QA implementation process: Diverse perspectives

The analysis of the QA implementation revealed a wide range of perspectives and considerations. Participants reflected on various processes and practices at both institutional and department levels. Their reflections included different stages, from strategic planning to documentation procedures, such as drafting the ISAA and the Oman Qualification Framework (OQF) report. Additionally, participants discussed some procedures of internal audits conducted within the university branch, as well as recent initiatives, such as the university merger project. Furthermore, a few commented on events organised in collaboration with industry and community partners, as well as the role of research in shaping QA practices and policies.

Generally, six participants across all branches initially expressed satisfaction and happiness with the QA implementation process, describing it as well-structured, clear, effective, beneficial, and efficient. For example, Bharat said:

> The implementation of the QA process is very clear. Nearly everyone, whether directly or indirectly involved, is aware of what is happening in QA, the organisational, strategic, and action plans in place. Roles and responsibilities, as well as committee and organisational structures, are well-defined and understood by all.

Rania also regarded the QA process as effective and beneficial, expressing satisfaction with the progress achieved, especially when compared to past semesters and academic years. She highlighted the positive impact of the process by noting improvements in outcomes, such as rising numbers of certain key performance indicators. Similarly, Sahar shared her personal perception of the implementation of the QA system, stating, "I felt it was efficient." She observed that "there is no difference between what is being practised here at the university" and her previous experience working at a private university, emphasising that "it's almost the same." Anwar acknowledged the efforts of the QA department, stating, "They are doing a good job. We are happy about them."

John emphasised that QA was not merely best practice but a foundational element that ensured smooth operations and continuous improvement.

However, despite these expressions of contentment, more than half of the participants, including those who initially appeared satisfied, voiced concerns and highlighted gaps in current QA implementation. Three participants acknowledged the complexity of QA implementation and the challenging nature of the QA system, despite its demanding nature in any workplace. Jalal, from branch 1, noted that the initial stage of QA implementation was particularly challenging due to unfamiliar terminology and the effort needed to understand it. He acknowledged, however, that over time, "it becomes like a routine, it's not that much difficult," indicating that the process became easier as he adapted. On the other hand, John experienced the QA system as an added responsibility, though he believed that QA should be a way of life. “It should be part and parcel of the education process.”

Within Branch 4, Aliya rated the current QA system five out of ten, citing uncertainties and disruptions caused by the university merger project. Faiz raised several concerns about the QA implementation process, though many were conveyed indirectly. He expressed uncertainty about the appropriate terminology to describe the process, yet implied that it had been mishandled. He suggested that this mishandling might be linked to personal traits, hinting at issues within the university branch’s senior management, or other underlying factors that warranted deeper reflection on the causes.

Six participants across all branches noted that implementing QA processes did not lead to ongoing improvements. For example, Anwar pointed out certain deficiencies in the QA process and believed that the university and departments prioritised quantity over quality. Yet John approached criticism cautiously, implying that ensuring the smooth operation of the QA process should be the university’s top priority to enable ongoing improvement. Drawing on his knowledge of international standards, Adil assessed the QA process as inadequate, noting it may fail to meet global benchmarks.

Faiz also critiqued the first-stage assessment of the ISAA conducted prior to the university merger, questioning the feedback from senior management on the branch performance. He highlighted how to senior management communicated the external feedback, remarking, "We were told that we were 100/100, but the feedback we received was different." He further explained that in the early stage of the ISAA report, his university branch received two commendations and 57 recommendations, leaving the situation ambiguous and raising doubts about the process's effectiveness. Although Faiz was only indirectly involved in QA activities, particularly in collecting stakeholder responses through surveys, he observed that response rates in some areas were very low. This led him to suggest that certain activities might need to be repeated and that feedback be gathered several times to ensure reliability. Ultimately, Faiz concluded that the assessment may have been mishandled during the ISAA writing process, reinforcing his broader concerns about the procedure.

Through the lens of preparing the operational plan, Faris provided a specific context. He explained that at the beginning of each academic year, the department received the branch's operational plan. Based on this overarching plan, the department was responsible for developing its own operational plan, which was then reviewed by the QA committee members, including Faris and his colleagues. He emphasised that the process of obtaining feedback and approval from the branch's QA department was particularly time-consuming. He noted that "this procedure takes a very long time, so in the middle of the semester, when we should be implementing the plan, we are actually still developing it." Faris further stressed that the extensive time required for plan development and approval caused a misalignment between planning and execution. He said, "We ended up having a lot of discrepancies in what people are doing," referring to the gap between ongoing activities and the official operational plan. These discrepancies arose because academic staff were operating under incomplete guidelines while awaiting the approved plan, leading to inconsistencies in meeting QA requirements. Faris believed that "an operational plan for a certain semester has to be prepared and approved before the start of the semester. Therefore, everyone is informed about it, and they will essentially plan their year according to the operational plan's requirements."

Beyond these general perceptions, participants' responses revealed more dominant patterns: many characterised the QA implementation process as a mechanism of compliance, a form of control and a bulk of documentation.

6.6.1 A mechanism of compliance

One of the main themes emerging from participant responses was the perception of QA implementation as a compliance-driven process. Almost all participants either directly or indirectly remarked on the strong emphasis on following established rules, standards, policies, and procedures. Some explicitly used the term compliance, while others referred to related concepts such as adherence, following standards, subscribing to standards, or aligning with policies, all of which reflected a shared understanding of QA as a structured and rule-bound process. For example, Adil's words highlighted the early stages of implementing the QA system at the university, which emphasised compliance to OAAA requirements:

> Initially, we focus on subscribing to the standards set by the authority, the standards in terms of what needs to be done on a certain process, what needs to be done on the documentation, and what needs to be done on how you would be achieving your plan or your processes, your policy that you had laid out.

The repeated use of terms like 'have to' and 'must' by three participants in relation to academics' adherence to QA requirements indicates a strong sense of obligation, reflecting a high level of compliance with academic norms and expectations. For example, Adil explained that "academics have to be very diligent and be able to basically achieve whatever the requirements are." Abeer emphatically expressed, "As lecturers, we have to follow everything outlined in the standards and policies; this is of utmost importance." Anwar also emphasised that academic staff must follow the QA policies once they were disseminated by the senior management.

Nasim's response revealed a strong link between compliance and institutional recognition. She noted that the Head of the Academic Department attributed any positive outcomes to QA compliance, emphasising the imperative to follow all QA procedures and check all QA requirements. Nasim observed that strict adherence to policies and QA requirements enhanced the department's reputation. The Head's focus on thorough checks ensured full compliance, which, in turn, generated institutional appreciation and elevated the department's position within senior management.

John depicted QA as mainly a compliance-oriented framework. His wording consistently presented QA as a way to enforce institutional rules. He stressed that QA involved making sure staff “comply with all the requirements,” that “policies are properly implemented,” and that “activities are carried out on time.” Faris built upon this compliance focus by questioning the underlying rationale for QA's standardised procedures. While he acknowledged that QA ensured consistency. He stated, “Everybody knows what needs to be done, and how it needs to be done," and he viewed these standardised processes as essentially rooted in institutional distrust in some of academics. This suggests that Faris perceived the standardised QA checks as an institutional response to suspected non-compliance rather than an improvement strategy.

Five participants described how internal audits were conducted at both the institutional and department levels as mechanisms to ensure compliance. Sahar, for instance, described the intensive investigation process conducted through external and internal audits:

> Internal auditing generally takes place in various phases or stages and is carried out twice a year. When submitting the report to the OAAA, all relevant auditing documents and materials must be included for approval and to verify compliance.

A few participants viewed the QA process as a way to find faults and identify gaps. From their perspective, QA is similar to an investigative inquiry, with scrutiny applied to various parts of the QA implementation. Participants believed that QA involves asking probing questions, collecting and analysing data, and identifying areas that might be lacking or need improvement, much like an investigator examines evidence for clues. For example, Noor explained, this process could be embarrassing, and the QA members focused on uncovering the “black holes” and commenting on the negative aspects.

> If I understand the types of questions they ask early, I can prepare my documents with relevant evidence. Sometimes, you may feel that you are doing your work in the best possible way, but they do not show appreciation for that effort. They try to find the black holes, and they will

comment on the negative points. It would also be nice if they could give feedback on the good procedures and how policies are implemented.

6.6.2 A form of control

While compliance may seem closely related to policy adherence, it inherently involves a sense of control. For nearly all participants, the QA implementation process functioned as a way to exercise control over academic activities. For example, Abeer stated, “quality people become heads of department,” indicating that the QA department or its representatives assume an authoritative role. Abeer viewed this as a common perspective among those working within her department. She also discussed a specific practice within the academic department regarding this form of control, explaining that any directives issued by the QA department were supported and enforced by the academic department heads, making them mandatory. Faiz reflected on his experience with a mixture of caution and frustration, providing a detailed account of how QA tasks functioned as a control mechanism within his branch. Before sharing his experience, he hesitated, seeking reassurance about confidentiality, a sign that immediately indicated the institutional risk of speaking honestly about the QA processes.

The control dynamics became quite evident when Faiz described the survey analysis tasks he was assigned. The experience started simply enough: "I have been given a task," he explained. "And then, I have been called by the authorities [senior management], maybe multiple times, asking me what happened with that." The senior management did not wait for him to complete the work within the agreed timeframe. Instead, just three days into a two-week deadline, they summoned him for interrogation. Faiz said, “I said, you gave me two weeks, and just three days later, you are asking me!” He explained that the authorities called him not only to monitor whether the work was completed but also to evaluate how it was carried out, enabling them to intervene and guide outcomes towards predetermined conclusions. This created constant pressure to produce results that satisfied scrutiny rather than accurately reflecting the institution’s reality.

When Faiz attempted to exercise his professional judgment by saying, “As per my understanding, I’m going to do it this way,” his autonomy was instantly restricted. The senior management rejected his approach completely: “No, no, no, no, this is not the right way. No, no, no, who told you to do this?” Faiz explained that previously agreed plans were suddenly cancelled, and he was told, “Oh, actually, we are going to tell you how you have to do it.” This was not collaborative guidance; it was an assertion of complete control over the methodology, aimed at ensuring the process delivered the specific “manmade” results the authorities desired, rather than the truths the data might reveal.

Despite the senior management prescribing exact methods and effectively predetermining the desired outcomes, all responsibility for the final results rested solely on Faiz: “When things were not as required, the whole thing fell on me, and that's it. You did that one, and since you didn't do it properly, that's why we don't get the results.” This revealed a deeply controlling system: if Faiz produced the “manmade” results the senior management wanted, data shaped to fit institutional expectations, the system operated smoothly, and everyone seemed satisfied. However, if he failed to produce outcomes that matched expectations, perhaps because reality did not align with the desired expectations, he alone would be blamed for incompetence or poor execution. The system, therefore, pressured staff to produce fabricated compliance evidence while holding them personally accountable if the fabrication was unconvincing or if they resisted manipulating the findings. Faiz also believed that this, or any similar situation in which rigid control and fluctuating expectations dominate a work environment, “ultimately results in the staff running away from all tasks.”

Malik, from the same branch as Faiz, supported his point by highlighting the difficulties encountered during ISAA preparation, noting that documentation was the primary obstacle. He mentioned that the QA department formed a team of academic staff to work on this. “At times, we even had to generate data ourselves to fill gaps where evidence was lacking to ensure that the process could move forward smoothly.”

Abeer explained that managerial authority was deliberately used as a control mechanism to ensure department compliance with QA requirements. She explained how this works in practice: “For example, if I send any mail, I also receive a follow-up email from the HoD [Head of Department] asking them to do it; it becomes compulsory.” This coordination between QA personnel and the head of academic department creates a two-tiered enforcement system, explicitly designed to ensure staff compliance.

A few participants perceived that the QA system extended institutional authority into their personal time, blurring the boundaries between work and life. Aliya reflected on her experience, stating: “When the top management realises, they need something done by the academic staff as per the QA requirements, especially during the preparation of the QA audit report, no matter what you’re doing: sleeping, eating, or even on vacation, you are expected to respond.” She also attributed this to poor planning but noted that this method of control became normalised, showing how QA functions as a way of enforcing compliance and coordinating work, making academics’ time and activities subject to continuous institutional oversight.

A third of the participants across all branches reported involvement in preparing the ISAA, regardless of their knowledge or expertise. Faiz explained that writing the ISA application required specialised analytical skills that enable writers to view QA requirements from different angles and perspectives. Many noted the lack of training and experience among those involved in QA processes as a challenge, yet they had no choice but to comply with institutional demands. Faiz emphasised this coercive dynamic: “Not only I, but many other academics share the view that we were involved in writing the ISAA without any prior knowledge about this aspect of quality.” Institutional control, therefore, operated by assigning tasks without regard for staff preparedness, mandating participation regardless of capability, and forcing academics to conform, thereby subordinating professional judgment to administrative demands.

Faiz described the resulting sense of powerlessness: “The university authority and QA management implemented different tactics, and academics were going along with it… However, I believe it ended up making things even more messed up.” While senior management may seek to ensure academic involvement and demonstrate their engagement with QA processes, this approach reveals inadequate planning, training, or consideration of whether such forced participation would actually be effective.

Referring to Faiz's point about data fabrication in the previous section, Faiz also emphasised this in the context of control, stating that the problem stems from staff being assigned more tasks than they could realistically manage while facing intense pressure to meet QA requirements. In response to this unsustainable workload, Faiz highlighted that some academics resorted to "cooking the results", producing fake data and documents that only create the illusion of completed work. This highlights a breakdown in effective control, where the focus shifts from honest performance to maintaining appearances.

When discussing the QA process, three participants from different branches referred to QA as policing, a metaphor that reveals their experience of it as a regulatory form of control focused on compliance and monitoring. John, while acknowledging this perception, showed reluctance to personally critique the QA system, carefully distanced himself by referring to his colleagues' perceptions rather than speaking in the first person. For example, he stated, "If you ask the staff here about their morale regarding QA, they perceive QA as being like the police. This is their impression. At UTAS, QA is seen as policing and finding fault with them." The use of third-person framing, despite being asked about his own views, deflects potential criticism by attributing these negative perceptions to his colleagues.

QA as policing perspective was not limited to John. Nasim provided an honest insider view, having worked as a QA coordinator herself. She explicitly acknowledged the policing nature of her role:

> I am like a police officer; I have to check in from time to time to see what the staff are doing. For example, if I see a survey has been published, I need to ask the staff how they published it. They must obtain approval from the QA members. This is our task, so that's why they hate us. Therefore, whatever they want to do, they must schedule an appointment with the QA department.

Nasim not only internalised the police description but also explicitly linked it to staff resentment, 'that's why they hate us', implying that even QA practitioners recognise the tense interactions these control mechanisms generate.

Faiz expressed frustration and a feeling of restriction regarding the tasks and responsibilities assigned within the QA processes. He pointed out the lack of clarity or justification for various tasks, including creating files and attending committee meetings. Faiz specifically highlighted being assigned to carry out an internal audit, a responsibility he found unusual given his primary role as an academic rather than a QA specialist, and for which he had received no training or preparation. He suggested that questioning and dissent were discouraged, alluding to potential consequences that might affect his existing employment contract.

Faiz clarified that his dissatisfaction did not arise from the concept of quality itself, but from the procedural mechanisms used to enforce it. This distinction highlights how implementation practices, rather than quality principles, often lead to resistance among academics. This sense of restriction and potential repercussions shaped a broader negative view of QA among academic staff, who, despite their dissatisfaction, felt obliged to follow established processes and policies to safeguard their employment.

6.6.3 A bulk of documentation

All participants, regardless of academic department, identified the QA system as a documentation and reporting exercise centred on paperwork. Adil, in his own words, described it as “a bulk of documentation.” As the participants explained, this documentation required additional administrative work and time commitments from academic staff. Despite their teaching hours, Sahar emphasised that academics operated under constant pressure from documentation and reporting requirements across multiple committees at both department and university levels. Faris described the QA implementation process as complex, lengthy, and hectic due to extensive documentation. He explained that the QA process required writing meeting minutes and keeping numerous records of everything academics did. He resented that academic staff did not always know exactly what was expected of them:

> We write something, and then the quality department says, "No, this is not what we want." We then engage in discussions with them, attempting to precisely grasp their expectations. We make revisions, and yet again,

> they may point out that something else is missing. Consequently, it becomes a lengthy procedure in many instances.

Anwar and Moeen from two different branches explained that a significant portion of QA work centred on documentation, specifically writing and consolidating reports on A4 paper. Anwar questioned whether what was documented on A4 paper truly reflected the quality of execution, satisfaction levels, or adherence to key performance indicators. Moeen likewise questioned whether this documentation and reporting accurately reflected the true nature of academic work: "Is this really what we are doing? Report what you are doing every day. Report on your activities every month. This doesn't align with the reality of our work."

Abeer also linked the QA implementation process to record-keeping. She emphasised that academic staff must document their actions by submitting different reports.

> Whatever academics do, they will write. We instruct them to align their actions with the strategic plan, specifying the corresponding goal and KPI [key performance indicators]. After a four-month period, we request an achievement report indicating whether the goals were met or not, accompanied by the supporting documents. Subsequently, we compile a single achievement report for the entire academic department.

Mahdi described QA as being perceived among his colleagues as “just documentation,” resulting in an overwhelming administrative burden. To address this issue and shift the perception of QA from a paperwork-heavy process to a more streamlined and meaningful system, Mahdi suggested reducing documentation volume or adopting digital solutions to simplify reporting requirements.

More than half of the participants across all branches noted that the documentation they were required to complete was often not directly relevant to their teaching responsibilities. This distraction from their core duties prevented them from dedicating valuable time to improving and preparing their teaching activities. For example, Noor and Faris openly expressed their view that documentation tasks increased the workload of academic staff and distracted attention from essential teaching activities, at the expense of the intrinsic quality of these activities, such as class planning, lesson preparation, classroom management, pedagogical development and professional development. Adil also recognised this, stating:

> The QA processes become an additional task because they involve documentation. They involve a lot of documentation. Consequently, the QA processes pile up tasks. To some extent, there is a perception that most tasks undertaken by academic staff are now more related to quality assurance, clerical, or administrative tasks, rather than focusing primarily on teaching and learning tasks.

Due to the extensive reporting and documentation requirements that created significant workload burdens, both Sahar and Noor from two different branches recommended systemic improvements to streamline the QA documentation process. Drawing from her experience with QA documentation at another HEI in Oman, Sahar recognised the importance of proper documentation. However, she identified a critical gap in the current university's approach. She recommended implementing a standardised coding system to ensure consistent identification of department and university documents. This proposal highlights that the existing system lacks a clear document classification, leading to organisational confusion and making it difficult to locate, track, or distinguish between different types of institutional records.

Noor highlighted the urgent need for increased technology integration in QA processes, especially to reduce reliance on manual paperwork and automate routine tasks. She questioned why the used Information Management System (CIMS) was not utilised more effectively:

> Why can't the College Information Management System be programmed to automatically generate the information needed for course advisory files, instead of requiring staff to prepare them manually each semester? Why isn't there an advising tracking function in CIMS that allows me to monitor my advisees' progress and academic level, rather than having to track everything manually?

Beyond identifying specific gaps, Noor challenged the main purpose of certain documentation requirements and expressed frustration with redundant or unclear processes:

> I keep thinking there must be better solutions, but we need time to examine how we utilise our systems. Do we actually need all these documents? Sometimes we're preparing documentation, and I don't understand its purpose. For example, we complete curriculum mapping in course files, but I don't understand the point of that mapping or how it's being used.

While documentation can play a role in supporting QA when used purposefully and strategically, it became burdensome when reduced to a performative exercise focused solely on generating evidence of activity. Participants' perspectives revealed that excessive documentation disrupted their academic work by consuming time that should be dedicated to teaching and research.

6.7 Navigation Summary

The findings in this chapter revealed the diverse perspectives of academic staff regarding the QA system within the university, some of which extended beyond the university's QA system to include reflections on the ISA of the OAAAQA. It is important to note that there is no singular, unified overview or perception of QA among academic staff. Instead, perceptions were shaped by individual experiences and levels of involvement in QA activities and tasks.

Throughout this chapter, I presented the varying ways in which academics' voices were incorporated. The discussion showed a range of engagement, including both direct and indirect forms. Some of the participants were actively involved the policy-making process, being representatives of their academic departments, while others were less directly engaged or had minimal involvement. Furthermore, while academics were given opportunities to provide feedback, there was a notable absence of a structured method to ensure that all academic staff were adequately informed. This deficiency undermines the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism and raises questions about the extent to which feedback was incorporated into policy decisions.

QA system communication emerges as a central theme throughout the chapter, with participants noting both its importance and limitations. While participants recognised the importance of effective communication in facilitating QA processes, they also highlighted the challenges of communication overload and inefficiency. The findings revealed diverse communication channels, both formal and informal, used to communicate policies and practices, highlighting the efforts of some university branches to utilise both written and verbal methods, using platforms such as WhatsApp, Gala, workshops, sessions, emails, memos, meetings, and university boards. However, despite the abundance of communication channels available, concerns and complaints were raised within the academic community.

The QA implementation process received significant attention in this chapter. Participants perceived the QA implementation process in various forms, such as a mechanism of compliance, a form of control and a documentation burden. The perceived outcomes of the QA implementation process had considerable consequences for academic staff. It contributes to a culture of bureaucratic oversight. It also results in an administrative burden and reduces from the core mission of teaching. Moreover, it creates a climate of mistrust and apprehension among academic staff.

In the next chapter, I explore the broader impacts of the implementation of QA policies, processes and practices on academic work.

CHAPTER 7: IMPACTS OF THE QA SYSTEM ON ACADEMIC WORK

> I believe that quality assurance is a specialisation. Instead of assigning these responsibilities to lecturers, the universities should employ dedicated QA specialists within each department. For academics like me, balancing QA duties with teaching commitments is problematic. When I am engaged in classes, I cannot complete QA tasks on time.

—A quote by Abeer, *A Participant in this Study*

7.1 Introduction

The quality assurance (QA) system is defined by the official QA framework, policies, procedural documents, and institutional reports that emphasise accountability and improvement. However, behind these QA processes, policies, and practices lie different realities: those experienced daily by academic staff as they navigate QA requirements while managing their academic work. This chapter examines how the QA system impacts three core aspects of academic work: teaching, professional development, and staff performance appraisal.

7.2 Perceived changes in academic provision

Did QA implementation change how academics teach? And if teaching practices changed, was QA the driving force behind these changes? Rather than assuming QA automatically improves teaching, as institutional rhetoric often suggests, this section investigates whether academics perceive QA as influencing their teaching and, if so, in what ways. All participants reported experiencing changes in academic provision. These perceived changes were evident across several aspects of their academic work that align with Standard 2 (Academic Provision and Resources) of the OAAAQA framework (OAAAQA, 2024a). They fall into three main areas: teaching practices, academic integrity policy, and infrastructure and resources.

7.2.1 Teaching practices

Overall, participants acknowledge positive changes in teaching practices over the last few years, particularly during the preparation of their branches for the Institutional Standard Assessment Application (ISAA), the piloting processes under the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF), and external audits. These changes were obvious in curriculum development, learning outcomes alignment, pedagogy and assessment design. However, participants reported that not all these changes were directly related to QA requirements. They also identified ongoing problems within each area, as addressed below.

7.2.1.1 Curriculum development

Curriculum development emerged as a key area of change for approximately half of the participants, particularly in relation to the OQF. These participants viewed curriculum reforms as a direct institutional response to QA requirements, suggesting that the implementation of the OQF provided an opportunity to revisit programme structures and content. As noted by five participants, the university established a specialisation committee at the college level within the university's senior management and a curriculum committee at the branch level as procedural practices to align with QA requirements. The participants underlined that these committees exercised a more direct influence on curriculum, assessment, and teaching.

Sahar explained that the curriculum committee was responsible for conducting regular course reviews to oversee and ensure that all academic departments adhered to the QA framework and achieved OQF objectives (OAAAQA, 2023a). Sahar recognised that "course reviews are essential and can be performed by various academic staff, including senior staff and programme coordinators, to ensure teaching quality is maintained." Three participants highlighted how the OQF enhanced their understanding and practice of mapping course learning outcomes to programme learning outcomes and aligning learning outcomes with graduate attributes, delivery methods, and assessment practices. Faris underlined that a course coordinator was responsible for this mapping and communicated the aligned framework to all teaching staff at the beginning of the semester to ensure consistency in teaching delivery.

Drawing on the OQF, two participants noted that it cannot be viewed merely as an external duty but as a vital mechanism for shaping curriculum development. Adil highlighted the role of OQF level descriptors, as outlined in the OQF document (OAAAQA, 2023a), which served as benchmarks to measure the relative demands, complexity, depth of knowledge, and learner autonomy expected at each qualification level. He believed that ensuring the course aligned with the level descriptors encouraged faculty to reflect on and improve their teaching methods to achieve the intended outcomes. Aliya explained that curriculum mapping had progressed from initially unfamiliar and burdensome tasks into accepted elements of the academic workload and a routine embedded in their academic work. Despite this, she felt that the documentation required for this mapping process continued to burden the administrative workload and undermine the overall quality of teaching.

While Rania acknowledged that QA may have enhanced the curriculum review process and established a more structured system, she clarified that such processes existed prior to the implementation of QA frameworks. The curriculum decisions were made at the top-management level by the specialisation committee. She explained that the QA framework was designed to uphold a culture of continuous improvement by recommending the collection of insights and feedback from both students and staff to identify areas for improvement in teaching practices. As she described, this feedback informed adjustments to teaching practices and ensured they remained adaptive and responsive to the academic community's needs.

In contrast, Noor expressed frustration over what she perceived as the disregard for staff feedback during the curriculum review process. Noor stated that if she had decision-making authority, she would disband the curriculum review committee that was formed to satisfy QA requirements, expressing doubts about its effectiveness." Despite consistently providing input on various courses and practices, she felt that her suggestions were largely ignored. Noor captured this issue by saying:

> Lecturers have concerns about the curriculum review process. There is little flexibility to adapt the requirements to the specific context of our programmes, yet we are expected to follow them strictly. Introducing more flexibility could reduce unnecessary burdens and make the curriculum review process more effective.

Malik from another branch echoed Noor’s point and explained that the standardisation of learning outcomes reduced academic flexibility. Previously, he emphasised that academics could select their own reference books; however, to demonstrate compliance with QA requirements, they received all course materials, references, and even PowerPoint slides from the specialisation committee through a common system.

Moeen highlighted how institutional constraints impeded timely curricular updates, creating particular challenges for rapidly changing fields such as Information Technology. The lengthy processes for approving new courses meant that by the time changes were implemented, the content was already outdated. Therefore, Moeen developed his own approach to incentivise self-directed learning through external platforms like Udemy, an online learning platform where people can take courses on a wide variety of topics, from technical skills (programming, data analysis, design) to business and personal development. He explained:

> I told my students that if they undertake a self-study course on Udemy or any other platform, it should meet these criteria. For example, it should last at least five hours and offer a certificate. This way, when you apply for a job tomorrow, you will stand out from the others.

This approach reveals Moeen's concern for student employability and his attempt to bridge the gap between academic curricula and labour market demands. He concluded that his students were motivated. The uptake was remarkable: 25 out of 26 students in his course completed this task. While it remains unclear whether their motivation stemmed from learning interest or grade pragmatism, the results indicate the effectiveness of his approach.

The curriculum development process also incorporated input from industry representatives, who provided feedback on curriculum revisions through activities such as department-level SWOT analyses. Bharat acknowledged the value of industry feedback in aligning the curriculum with market needs. However, he pointed out, "We cannot always ask the industry, what are the gaps?" He argued that while industry input was important, it should not overshadow the expertise of academic staff who were directly engaged in teaching. Bharat emphasised that as academics actively working in the field, they were well-positioned to evaluate the courses and identify areas for improvement. Despite this internal expertise, he expressed frustration that academics' insights were frequently disregarded in favour of externally driven assessments. This marginalisation of faculty input, he suggested, represented a missed opportunity to draw on the knowledge of those most familiar with the day-to-day realities of teaching and student learning.

In addition to the points noted above, six participants across all four university branches commented that COVID-19 played a significant role in curriculum development. Adil, for example, noted that COVID-19 prompted them to reconsider their learning outcomes as digital skills had to be integrated into the programme and its course learning outcomes. Rania emphasised that during COVID-19, QA guidelines became less procedural, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were expected to independently manage changes to their curriculum design. As the acute phase of the pandemic subsided, Bharat reflected on its lasting impact on academic work and noted how COVID-19 experiences became part of institutional learning and QA discussions. Similarly, Adil emphasised the ongoing impact of the pandemic: “Gradually, universities are adopting new teaching practices.” This indicates that emergency adaptations in teaching were documented and analysed to continually improve quality, rather than being treated as temporary measures.

Beyond QA requirements, broader external pressures, particularly international competition and global higher education standards, compelled universities to adapt and improve their curricula. Malik emphasised this point and identified Oman Vision 2040 as a powerful driver for updating the programmes and courses, creating pressure that goes beyond national QA frameworks. He noted that Vision 2040 aims to rank at least three Omani universities in the QS Top 300 or 500 by 2040, and that the university aspires to be among them. This consequently compelled senior management to improve their programmes, align them with international benchmarks, and enhance educational quality. Malik concluded, “If you want to be there, then we have to, we really have to follow international frameworks,” with “being there” referring to inclusion in the QS ranking list. This indicates that, while the regulated national QA system provided frameworks to follow, the primary impetus for curriculum development came from the need to compete globally.

According to four participants across the branches, the university merger project emerged as a significant factor during the post-COVID period, representing an opportunity to reshape teaching practices. They noted that the merger project contributed to the establishment of teams and committees responsible for curriculum review.

7.2.1.2 Pedagogical approaches

Almost all participants acknowledged that the QA system brought changes in pedagogical approaches. Participants observed that the recommendations, affirmations, and commendations in their audit reports, arising from Stage 1 of the Institutional Quality Audit (IQA), were analysed to inform pedagogical improvements. In response to Criterion 2.4 (Teaching and Learning Framework) in the QA framework (OAAAQA, 2024a), participants underlined that the university attempted to implement the listed indicators and guidelines to demonstrate compliance with the defined teaching and learning approaches. These approaches reflect modern pedagogies, incorporate appropriate learning technologies, and promote student-centred methods.

For example, five participants identified the student-centred approach as a significant pedagogical shift, as emphasised in QA audit recommendations. Both Faiz and Malik highlighted the student-centred approach as an adopted philosophy aligned with QA requirements. Faiz described the implementation of this approach as a "drastic change" in student involvement from 2011 to 2023, while Malik reinforced this perspective and emphasised that the university prioritised a student-centred approach to foster a highly interactive environment in our classes. Despite this, Faiz noted that pedagogical transformation remained incomplete. He emphasised the need to incorporate case studies, pre-teaching scenarios, opportunities for students to express themselves, and platforms such as Kahoot to enhance engagement.

Within the same branch, Taher agreed with Faiz and Malik's point about the university's emphasis on a student-centred approach. He also highlighted a significant pedagogical shift, explaining that the university had moved away from traditional memorisation-based teaching towards diverse, contemporary methods:

> Previously, we followed a memorising and mentoring approach, but as we began implementing other methods, we shifted to student-centred learning, incorporating Bloom's taxonomy, project-based learning, group discussions, inverted classrooms, and field visits.

Six participants from all four branches acknowledged that COVID-19 accelerated the transition to digital pedagogy, which was subsequently formalised as a core institutional expectation. This transition was operationalised by the QA department, which embedded technological integration into teaching requirements. Abeer explained:

> Nowadays, we ask academics to shift to digital, so we ask, 'Did you make any of these transformations to the digital work?' If any staff member is not following this digital approach, the HoS [Head of Section] will ask them to explain why they are using a more traditional approach.

Similarly, Anwar recounted an incident in which the QA department mandated a technological adaptation during COVID-19, requiring a shift from traditional handouts to PowerPoint presentations. From Anwar's perspective, this shift represented pedagogical improvement, as he articulated that "PowerPoint is the modern way of presenting" and serves as an essential tool for developing student autonomy and research skills. He explained that the PowerPoint slides listed possible references and key concepts as guides rather than complete resources. Anwar expressed satisfaction with this approach, viewing the crisis as a means to elevate teaching practices. Bharat, a colleague in the same branch, also demonstrated how COVID-19 necessitated adaptive teaching strategies. With students unable to attend campus, the university substituted physical laboratory equipment with animations and digital tools to foster inter-department resource sharing and reframed material limitations as opportunities for innovation.

Both Noor and Faiz from two different branches acknowledged QA's value in improving teaching practices once the QA system started to be implemented. Noor stated that "QA helped to improve the teaching when the teaching was in the lowest stages", and Faiz appreciated the indicators and guidelines provided within the QA framework. However, both emphasised how COVID-19 disrupted established teaching practices and exposed some limitations in the existing QA framework. They highlighted that the pandemic revealed that QA mechanisms, designed for stable, classroom-based instruction and routine standardisation, were structurally unprepared to support the pedagogical innovation and adaptive flexibility required under crisis-driven transformation. This suggests an underlying tension between compliance-oriented QA and the capacity for responsive educational leadership during unprecedented disruption.

While the pandemic accelerated technological adoption, John from Branch 1 observed that teaching methods remained traditional. He emphasised that using PowerPoint slides remains boring for students. John advocated interactive methods in which academics act as moderators, facilitating student participation rather than "monopolising the teaching." This shift, he argued, would create reciprocal learning environments where "all of us inside the classroom are basically learning, both teachers and students." Beyond pandemic-driven changes, Bharat from Branch 3 attributed pedagogical shifts to industry feedback, shaped by the university's proximity to industrial partners that provide students with practicum placements and site visits. He noted that external economic stakeholders were actively involved in strategic planning and educational development, functioning as key determinants of pedagogical reform.

7.2.1.3 Assessment practices

Participants reported that assessment practices underwent notable changes shaped by converging pressures from quality assurance mandates, COVID-19 disruptions, and industry requirements. Half of the participants across all four branches indicated that, rather than relying solely on traditional tests and quizzes, the university had adopted a variety of assessment methods aimed at fostering independent learning, aligning with industry skills, and emphasising practical outcomes over purely theoretical ones. Some of these assessment types included written assignments, mini-projects, project-based assessments, reflections on field visits, and case study analyses. For example, Malik shared, “We have to keep case studies where students read, understand, analyse, and then respond,” reflecting an emphasis on analytical skills.

However, Adil expressed concern, stating, “We are training our students to become employees rather than creators or employers,” suggesting that the QA approach prioritised immediate employability at the expense of broader competencies such as community engagement and entrepreneurial thinking. He also criticised the prevailing focus on cognitive assessments, noting, “Most assessments are anchored on the IQ, Intelligence Quotient, rather than on behaviour and affective assessment.” Malik echoed this perspective, observing that although the use of digital resources had increased, traditional assessment methods still dominated.

Addressing recommendations from the institutional quality audit and the OQF piloting audit, four participants from three different branches highlighted changes to assessment practices aimed at improving quality by adjusting both the quantity and types of assessments. This was a shift away from excessive reliance on traditional quizzes toward more varied and authentic assessment methods. Moeen, for example, described the introduction of a "fixed number of assessments," contrasting previous practices in which some subjects conducted up to five quizzes while others held only two. Mahdi and John similarly explained that marks were now distributed across a broader range of activities, such as mini projects, group discussions, and other practical tasks, rather than being concentrated solely on tests and quizzes. This shift suggests an intention to promote more meaningful learning experiences. Bharat expressed a different perspective, perceiving this reduction as a tightening of discipline and the replacing of a flexible policy with one that demands sustained performance.

> Previously, we conducted three quizzes and selected the two best performances. However, it has now been changed to an average of two; we conduct only two, and that is the average. There is no room for issues such as student lethargy during the semester.

Additionally, Noor revealed that during the internal QA audit at her university branch, QA department members emphasised mapping assignments to learning outcomes in alignment with OQF requirements:

> I recall one time when QA department members conducted an internal audit; they asked whether we were mapping our assignments to the course learning outcomes. That time we did not. However, after we realised that we had to link the assignment to the learning outcome, we took action. We have also begun specifying in that assignment which outcome it will cover.

Seven participants across all four branches explained how exam moderation became an institutionalised part of QA, transforming assessment from an individual faculty responsibility into a multi-layered oversight system. Zahra demonstrated this by describing how moderation established a procedural norm: the distribution of question difficulty, the appropriateness of levels across various qualifications (diploma, advanced diploma, BTech), and the timeliness of feedback are all “well-planned and moderated.” This indicates that QA mechanisms turned assessment into a regulated and predictable activity governed by policy.

Moeen expanded on this by highlighting the procedural depth of exam moderation. He described how assessments were scrutinised for taxonomic balance (higher- versus lower-order thinking), with mark allocations clearly specified, rubric requirements standardised, and mandatory peer review to ensure that another lecturer verified alignment with specification tables. In this system, the cognitive levels of examination questions were reduced to a series of checkboxes indicating Bloom's taxonomy categories, requiring at least two moderators to validate for both midterm and final examinations. Three participants emphasised how this moderation process was monitored, making assessment oversight one of their key compliance checks. Nasim highlighted that the QA department monitored this moderation process through the internal audit. Adil and Abeer both described moderation as a non-negotiable process to guarantee fair and consistent student assessment experiences. Despite these established procedures, seven participants noted that the university senior management remained dissatisfied. They mentioned a plan to move toward centralised, standardised assessments overseen at the top level, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Two participants highlighted mock exams and remedial classes as practices introduced in response to QA recommendations to support at-risk and probation students. Faiz described mock exams as a proactive strategy, emphasising their flexible delivery to accommodate students in diverse circumstances. Noor noted that while remedial classes had not yet been implemented across all academic departments, their rollout remained a key target for the QA department. These classes are designed to strengthen students’ foundational knowledge and skills, ensuring they are better prepared for examinations.

Beyond its impact on curriculum and pedagogical approaches, three participants highlighted how COVID-19 also forced major changes in assessment practices. Malik, for example, explained, “During COVID-19, we couldn’t conduct the final examination, so there was a decision to have what we call written assignments.” These assignments allowed students to engage more critically with the material, giving them time to analyse questions, gather information, and learn independently. At the same time, Malik noted a challenge in that “plagiarism cases increased,” highlighting the need for additional safeguards to maintain academic integrity. To address these challenges, the senior management introduced a range of strategies. Assignments were designed using a standardised rubric to set expectations, Turnitin was used to check originality, and questions emphasised higher-order thinking to encourage critical analysis rather than rote learning. Students were typically given a 48-hour window to complete these assignments, fostering independent time management and problem-solving skills. This approach was entirely new to many students, who initially found it challenging to adapt to a more self-directed, reflective assessment approach.

7.2.2 Academic integrity policy

Academic integrity emerged as a key shift in practice in response to recommendations from Stage 1 of the IQA. The QA framework positions academic integrity as an essential element of academic provision, embedding it as an independent criterion within Standard 2: Academic Provision and Resources. This criterion requires HEIs to cultivate a culture of honesty through policies, educational programmes, and systems for preventing, detecting, and addressing misconduct among students and staff (OAAAQA, 2024a). Three participants from two university branches discussed academic integrity in considerable detail, covering both its significance in teaching and the practical challenges of its implementation. They described how integrity-related policies had been strengthened and refined, particularly to address the dual pressures of IQA compliance and the practical challenges of maintaining academic honesty in digitised learning environments.

Before COVID-19, Adil and Malik reported that the university lacked an adequate system for academic integrity, despite IQA recommendations for its branches. Adil, for example, noted institutional challenges, explaining that the university struggled with “either a lack of enforcement or a lack of confidence in implementing academic integrity policies and tools.” Malik stated, "The university failed to build a strong culture of academic integrity among students," emphasising a lack of policies in this regard.

Malik explained that the shift from exam-based to assignment-based assessments during COVID-19 exposed significant gaps in policy enforcement, with plagiarism becoming more prevalent. While institutional policies were developed in response to this shift, establishing a graduated scale from mark deductions to dismissal in serious cases, they were not adequately communicated to students in advance. Malik noted, "Many students seemed unaware of the consequences," pointing to widespread plagiarism that revealed a significant gap between policy development and student awareness. He further explained that policies risked becoming hollow formalities rather than meaningful mechanisms for fostering academic honesty. His perspective suggests that effective academic integrity requires more than compliance with QA requirements; it demands a cultural transformation that embeds integrity values in institutional practice rather than treating them as externally imposed.

Both Malik and Noor found that the implementation of these policies was inconsistent across university branches, highlighting the challenges academic staff faced in balancing student support with the enforcement of academic integrity policies. Noor explained that some staff members felt pressured to be lenient, particularly toward students on probation, which could undermine the full implementation of these policies. Noor stressed, "Treating everyone equally and adhering to the rules is essential," highlighting that fairness and integrity were the cornerstones of maintaining a credible academic system.

Conversely, Adil characterised the post-COVID years as marking a meaningful shift in this area. He emphasised that implementing stricter penalties increased awareness towards an integrity environment, enabling students to better understand the importance of academic honesty. Noor also highlighted how technology had improved the detection and prevention of academic misconduct. She emphasised the significant role that tools like Turnitin played in strengthening the university's capacity to uphold academic integrity. She reported that, prior to Turnitin's adoption, plagiarism checks on course project reports and assignments were inconsistent, if not absent. However, with the introduction of the e-learning platform, these practices had significantly improved, making plagiarism detection more systematic.

7.2.3 Academic advising

Six participants from all branches discussed academic advising and their dual role as both lecturers and academic advisors. According to the ISAA manual, particularly Standard 2, Criterion 2.8 (Academic Advising), “all students are assigned to an academic advisor who is a full-time faculty member involved in their chosen programme of study, for the full duration of their enrolment in the programme” (OAAAQA, 2024a, p. 33). The participants emphasised academic advising as an administrative burden within academic provision, arguing that these obligations detracted from their primary teaching role, thereby affecting their capacity to ensure high teaching quality.

Malik, for example, explained the administrative load that academic advising imposed on academic staff. This included monitoring student academic performance, confirming prerequisites, approving course selections, conducting sessions, and keeping records of academic advising sessions and advice given to students, tasks that consumed time better spent on actual teaching and lesson preparation. He also expressed frustration with the university's frequent updates to degree audits for academic programmes, explaining: “It was a mess by the beginning of this semester because I had degree audit version three, then version four, and now, once again, there's a new version, version five.” He felt that QA requirements overlooked the practical realities of faculty responsibilities and that management needed to “understand our life, our challenges” in order to create practices that support teaching quality rather than undermine it.

Malik also noted that while an 18-hour weekly teaching load can be manageable, it requires sufficient preparation time to ensure quality. He explained that the workload extended beyond direct lecturing to include developing assignments, creating exams and engaging in other academic activities. In addition, registration and academic advising added further administrative duties. Zahra supported Malik's point, explaining that “academic staff are supposed to spend more time preparing for courses, but balancing QA obligations often makes this difficult.” She argued that the broad scope of administrative duties prevented full dedication to pedagogy, suggesting that with fewer such responsibilities, “academics can focus more on their courses, leading to better performance in their classroom.”

Abeer explained that serving in dual roles as an academic staff member and academic advisor was demanding. She noted that academic advising requires dedicated attention. She suggested that, rather than expecting lecturers to manage QA requirements and academic advising alongside teaching, dedicated QA specialists and academic advisors should be employed within each academic department. This would allow lecturers to focus on teaching without the added responsibilities. She added that, to comply with QA requirements in academic advising, academics need to attend workshops and training sessions to fully understand the academic advising policies and system. Despite her extensive participation in meetings and workshops, Abeer admitted feeling the ongoing complexity of advising tasks.

Malik argued that the university approach used in academic advising contradicted the principles of independent learning that QA policies purported to promote. By requiring academics to manage every aspect of student course selection, checking requirements, identifying suitable courses, and making final decisions, the system removed students from active participation in their own academic planning. In this case, students became passive recipients of pre-arranged academic pathways. This dependency, Malik suggested, undermined the very educational autonomy that QA standards claimed to foster.

7.2.4 Infrastructure and resources

Half of the participants identified infrastructure and resources as crucial factors influencing teaching quality. While the QA framework emphasises the importance of teaching and learning resources, such as library facilities, technological tools, and physical infrastructure, four participants pointed out that improvements in these areas remained largely intangible. Despite several recommendations in the audit reports for all university branches to address resource shortages, participants noted a lack of institutional responsiveness, as discussed below.

Taher emphasised that the university was underfunded, lacking basic operational necessities such as laboratory equipment, software and laptops. He highlighted that essential software purchase was particularly important for students’ curricular enhancement, yet these educational resources remained limited, which impacted the quality of student learning and skill development. He underscored the contradiction that the university expected high-quality work without providing the materials and tools necessary to achieve it. The simple examples he provided, such as the inability to print materials or distribute flyers, emphasised how resource deprivation reduced QA tasks to communication without action. Taher described the QA department as “just talk, talk, talk and no resources,” indicating that, in the absence of material capacity, the department could only discuss academic departments’ noncompliance with QA rather than implement solutions. He expressed deep frustration with the QA department's inability to influence resource allocation. While the QA department could identify needs and make recommendations, it lacked authority over resource allocation and could not compel the financial department to provide the required resources. Taher emphasised that ultimate control over purchasing and resource allocation rested with the university's senior management, who often failed to allocate sufficient funds to academic departments to enhance teaching quality.

Anwar attributed delays in addressing resource needs not to institutional neglect but to administrative processes associated with government funding mechanisms. He noted that “financial approval takes time,” as the university budget originates from the government and must undergo review by the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution to ensure proper use of public funds. This lengthy bureaucratic approval process resulted in delays that could undermine responsiveness, even when senior management was aware of resource inadequacies. Yet Anwar stated that if the university aims to obtain accreditation, it needs to address these resource shortages, particularly in light of the university merger project which adds urgency to meeting QA standards.

Malik questioned whether quality could be attained under current infrastructure constraints. He highlighted severely overcrowded offices, where more than 15 academic staff share limited space, as an example of conditions that make delivering quality virtually impossible. Beyond physical space, Malik highlighted inadequacies in teaching resources and software provision:

> We need to consider the state of our classrooms and facilities. For instance, we want to teach SPSS to our students, but we don't have the license. Despite our repeated requests to the Information Systems and

> Educational Technologies Centre, they have told us it's too expensive and that no budget is available. I believe we need proper infrastructure and the right software to effectively teach our students.

Additionally, Adil explained that providing resources alone was insufficient without accompanying training and capacity development, an area in which the university falls short. He emphasised, “Even if the university supplies software and equipment, it is essential that both students and lecturers have the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively use these resources.” This suggests that providing equipment and software would not improve educational quality unless accompanied by efforts to ensure users possess the competencies needed to use these resources.

Two participants from the same branch highlighted library facilities as an area lacking improvement despite recommendations from the ISA report and annual feedback from academic staff surveys on digital infrastructure, facilities, and services. Anwar expressed frustration with the feedback process, stating that despite annual requests for input on university services, "nothing changed." This reflects that the university did not translate these assessments into tangible actions. When asked for suggestions to improve the QA system, Adil identified the library as a priority area requiring attention. Notably, he emphasised that library facilities should extend beyond traditional physical resources to include digital infrastructure, specifically mentioning "E-library utilisation."

These examples show that although the recommendations listed in the QA audit reports for all university branches, each audited in different years but all prior to 2015, consistently highlighted the need for improvements in technological and physical infrastructure, as well as essential resources, these issues remained unaddressed nearly a decade later. Participants reported ongoing shortages, indicating limited progress. If the QA system is intended to enhance the quality of teaching, its anticipated impact has yet to be realised. Adil noted, “Still, there are continuing challenges and struggles for that to make sure that it is sustained. And we keep on looking to improve.” He attempted to convey that the university appears caught in a cycle of temporary gains, in which sustaining improvements is as challenging as achieving them. This reflects a persistent tension between the desire for progress and the reality of sustaining it over time.

7.3 Performance appraisal: Rhetoric and reality

The introduction of performance appraisal in relation to QA elicited a noticeable shift in tone among most participants. Moeen, Faiz and Zahra appeared eager to discuss it, however, this was accompanied by sarcasm and nervous laughter, suggesting they welcomed the opportunity to voice concerns about performance appraisal. In general, participants described university performance appraisal as complex and multidimensional. They noted ongoing challenges in its implementation and suggested that consensus on a coherent system had yet to be reached.

Participants discussed performance appraisal as a process, system, and set of practices. They examined it at both systemic and practical levels and explored how the university sought to align these practices with QA framework requirements, in particular Criterion 2.4 (Teaching and Learning Framework) and Criterion 4.5 (Staff Performance Planning and Review) (OAAAQA, 2024a). Criterion 2.4 Criterion 2.4 focuses on teaching and learning evaluation:

> The HEI monitors and regularly reviews the effectiveness of its teaching and learning framework by providing students and faculty with opportunities to evaluate the appropriateness and relevance of teaching and learning practices and uses the feedback to continuously enhance these practices. (OAAAQA, 2024a, p. 30)

Criterion 4.5 addresses staff performance review:

> The HEI has a well-defined policy and related procedures for staff performance planning and review which are readily accessible and communicated to staff. All staff are systematically and regularly evaluated on their performance based on clear criteria, indicators and targets, and individual performance objectives. Performance review outcomes and staff achievements are documented, and staff are consistently recognised through promotions and other incentives. The HEI regularly evaluates the effectiveness of its staff performance planning and review practice. (OAAAQA, 2024a, p. 43)

Five participants discussed efforts by some university branches to develop a comprehensive feedback system to gather hierarchical input on academic performance. These participants discussed attempts to implement a 360-degree feedback system as a platform through which academic staff received feedback from a professional network, including the head of academic department, the coordinator, and students, and which also generated reports and provided a view of strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development. According to participants, QA members in one branch collaborated with an internal technical team to identify practical strategies for implementing multi-source feedback. They piloted approaches that would be feasible to implement while meeting QA requirements, with the intention of eventually extending the system to other branches. However, Aliya explained that this system was no longer used once the Ejada system began to be implemented.

Fifteen participants introduced the Ejada system into the discussion as an external government system for evaluating academic performance. The Ejada system was introduced in late 2021, shortly before my PhD journey began, and officially launched in January 2022. The Arabic word "إجاده" (Ejada) can be translated into English as 'proficiency,' 'mastery,' or 'skilfulness.' It often refers to the ability to perform a task effectively and competently. Depending on the context, it can also imply excellence in a particular area or subject. The Ejada system is a performance measurement system implemented in Oman as part of the country's efforts to enhance government efficiency and serve as one of the enablers of Oman Vision 2040. Its goal is to foster a culture of excellence and accountability in the public sector by offering a structured approach to performance appraisals. It functions as an overarching structure for promotions and evaluations within the public sector.

Abeer explained that the Ejada system marked a significant shift toward a more centralised evaluation approach in the university. This view was widely shared, with ten participants reporting that implementation proved challenging due to the system's use of the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) methodology. Three participants also stated that many academics were unfamiliar with setting individualised, measurable objectives, which led to wide variation in how performance goals were defined across the university. To avoid inconsistencies and ensure compliance with the QA framework, the university recommended aligning Ejada's objectives with QA requirements. Faris explained that this approach not only standardised the appraisal process but also ensured that faculty were forced to implement QA requirements. Noor also mentioned that the university adopted the Ejada system as an embedded platform that consolidates various evaluation tools, including Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) and class observations. Specifically, these evaluation methods operated in the background, collecting data that fed into the Ejada system. For example, the results from class observations and student evaluations were not standalone assessments; instead, they were integrated into the Ejada platform as two main objectives and key performance indicators.

The implementation of the performance appraisal system elicited a wide range of responses from participants, revealing contrasting views on its value and impact on teaching practice. Their experiences raised an underlying question: did the appraisal system foster improvements in teaching, or did it primarily serve as a compliance mechanism to satisfy QA requirements? This question became increasingly difficult as participants described how issues of fairness, subjectivity, accountability pressures, and the absence of meaningful recognition all converged to shape, and often hinder, their approach to teaching.

7.3.1 Fairness and subjectivity

The perceived unfairness and subjectivity in the performance appraisal process emerged as a barrier to using appraisals for teaching development. SET and class observations were identified as the primary methods for evaluating teaching, yet both were considered susceptible to bias and insufficient for capturing teaching quality. Seven participants expressed frustration with these methods, centring their concerns on personal biases in evaluation, timing that made SET susceptible to grade-related influences, and the limited scope of what evaluation forms actually measured. These concerns were not about procedural fairness; they directly affected whether academics could trust appraisal feedback as a legitimate basis for improving their teaching.

Zahra firmly articulated how subjectivity undermined the developmental purpose of appraisals:

> Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, staff appraisals often carry elements of subjectivity and personal bias. This can lead to perceptions of unfairness or inaccuracy among academics, who may feel their performance was not evaluated fairly. As a result, the intended purpose of appraisals, which is to identify strengths and areas for improvement, can be undermined, making the process challenging to implement effectively.

This indicates that when academics doubted the validity of evaluations, they were less likely to engage with feedback as a tool for teaching improvement. Noor raised a related concern specific to rapidly changing fields, such as IT, in which evaluations could be influenced by the subject matter itself rather than by teaching quality. As she noted, "Some lecturers are competent but students' evaluation is affected by the nature of the subject." She explained that when students struggled with challenging or unfamiliar content, they might express frustration through lower scores, even when the instruction was highly effective.

Anwar expressed his frustration regarding the timing of the SET, which was conducted after midterms and could be heavily influenced by students' grades. He argued for including additional feedback methods, such as regular student meetings throughout the semester, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teaching effectiveness. "Ongoing feedback," he suggested, can provide a more accurate view of performance compared to single-point formal evaluations. His concern highlighted that the current evaluation approach prioritised administrative convenience and QA documentation over the collection of meaningful data that could inform teaching improvement. Zahra and Taher supported this view, advocating for a balanced and inclusive 360-degree appraisal model that avoids relying on the SET and gathers input from various stakeholders to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of individual strengths and areas for development. However, Aliya offered a contrasting viewpoint on the feasibility of implementing the 360-degree appraisal system in her department, describing it as her least favourite method. She doubted its fairness and accuracy.

The design of evaluation tools further compounded these concerns. John pointed out that some appraisal forms were designed to generate positive ratings across most lecturers, regardless of performance differences: "How will you be able to improve something that is already excellent? How can you fix something that is not broken?" In his view, the forms functioned more as validation exercises, confirming existing practices rather than as meaningful assessments that could guide the development of teaching. When evaluation tools are designed primarily to demonstrate compliance with QA requirements, showing that teaching is being evaluated, rather than to assess and improve teaching quality, the entire appraisal process risks becoming a bureaucratic exercise.

Noor also commented on standardised class observation forms that did not reflect the diverse realities of classroom teaching:

> Some forms need review and updates. We provide both practical and theoretical teaching, but the existing forms often do not suit the nature of these classes. For example, some criteria may be unattainable in a purely practical course. It could be helpful to either modify the forms to suit different teaching contexts or carry out multiple observations to ensure a thorough evaluation.

These standardised forms prioritised procedural compliance, fulfilling administrative requirements to demonstrate that evaluations occurred, but failed to provide the contextualised, meaningful feedback necessary to support actual teaching improvement across diverse disciplinary contexts.

7.3.2 Accessibility of feedback

Beyond concerns over the validity of evaluation methods, participants questioned whether they received feedback that could genuinely inform teaching development. Both Abeer and Sahar felt that SET feedback failed to provide constructive or actionable insights for improvement. Abeer explained that performance reviews were based on students completing end-of-semester surveys, averaging two semesters' worth of feedback data. She described this as an outdated approach that relied on numerical ratings while overlooking day-to-day improvements in teaching, limiting meaningful feedback and depriving academics of a constructive view of their strengths and areas for growth. The fact that academics were not given access to detailed feedback indicated that surveys were conducted primarily to generate evidence for QA compliance, to demonstrate that student feedback was being collected, rather than to support actual teaching improvement.

This way of withholding detailed feedback while collecting data for compliance purposes exemplifies the tension between improvement and compliance. Sahar's scepticism reflected this: "I don't think there will be a major change in the survey questions," expressing a common view that institutional changes to appraisal systems were often superficial, tweaking procedures to satisfy QA criteria while leaving issues unaddressed. When modifications serve primarily to demonstrate compliance with external requirements rather than to genuinely enhance teaching quality, academics recognise the disconnect and become cynical about the system's developmental potential.

However, Faiz offered a contrasting perspective, noting that in his branch, the SET process had shifted from withholding feedback to sharing detailed student comments, marking a departure from treating appraisals as mere evidence-gathering for QA purposes:

> Previously, SET reports were neither made public nor shared with staff members. However, over the past year, with the Performance Management System in place, any anonymous student comments are now shared with the staff member. This way, they can identify any weaknesses and pinpoint areas for improvement. The system has been effective in making feedback accessible to support faculty development.

His experience suggests that when the system prioritises teaching improvement over compliance documentation, academics can engage meaningfully with feedback to enhance their practice.

Malik's experience illustrated this positive potential. His one-on-one discussion with his Head of Department provided specific, actionable guidance: "The HoD said I was doing well in teaching but there were still areas to improve. He suggested using software to interact more with students, which made me realise the importance of integrating technology in my teaching." These recommendations prompted Malik to experiment with new teaching tools while fostering a mentor-like relationship that emphasised continuous development. This exemplifies how appraisals, when oriented toward improvement rather than compliance, can genuinely support pedagogical growth

7.3.3 Accountability pressures and professional autonomy

The implementation of performance appraisal tools, particularly the Ejada system, revealed significant issues regarding accountability pressures and professional autonomy. While some participants viewed structured accountability as supportive, most experienced it as coercive oversight that constrained their professional autonomy and reduced teaching development to compliance documentation. Half of the participants reported that, to comply with QA requirements, academics were required to address specific targets in the Ejada system that could be monitored through class observation and by meeting the predetermined target in SET. In addition to these tools, participants noted that academics could set two additional targets for research and professional development. Abeer expressed her positive view of this structure and noted that Ejada encouraged her to be accountable for her goals and to self-promote by documenting her other achievements alongside her teaching role:

> In Ejada, I can now report to the Head of Department and Head of Sections about my involvement in research projects and my work in the quality assurance and auditing committee.

Moeen explained that alongside the mandatory objectives linked to teaching, research and professional development, he was permitted to create one personal objective. This element of choice, he revealed, gave him a sense of ownership over the evaluation process. He argued, "My objectives are 1, 2, 3, 4, and the system is the proof that I achieved them."

Although it appears more structured, most participants expressed their frustration and disappointment regarding this system. They viewed its implementation as a bureaucratic mechanism rather than a tool for meaningful development. Five participants reported that all possible objectives were provided to them in a predetermined list from which they had to choose. Noor stated, "The goals we set in the Ejada system are not goals. They are our daily work." Her response suggests an important issue: the difficulty in distinguishing between routine duties and developmental targets. By combining these two aspects, the Ejada system may reduce performance appraisal to a box-ticking exercise, potentially limiting its capacity to encourage meaningful professional growth.

Although Abeer expressed satisfaction with the structure of the evaluation objectives, she agreed with Noor's perspective. She noted that academics who were not involved in university or department committees as coordinators or members would view the system as addressing their daily routine teaching responsibilities. She explained that academic staff were required to document the same tasks each semester, a process that felt redundant and unproductive.

Anwar and Noor, both from the same branch, held contrasting views on whether objectives should be self-directed or imposed by senior management, revealing a fundamental tension between autonomy and standardisation in teaching development. Anwar highlighted, "Staff shouldn't set their own objectives; instead, objectives should be established by the top management." He further explained that self-directed goal setting could lead to inconsistencies in how faculty represent their achievements. Noor, however, articulated an opposing view: "I feel it's unfair if the top management sets our academic goals. It's better that every staff member has the freedom to set their own goals." This tension reflects a conflict between two competing demands: the need for institutional consistency in meeting QA requirements and the importance of preserving academic autonomy in defining meaningful professional goals. Where top-down standardisation ensures uniform compliance, it risks overlooking the individualised and context-specific nature of genuine teaching improvement.

Faiz revealed the potential problems with such centralised control. Since targets must be approved by the hierarchy and by heads of academic departments or sections, Faiz felt that those in senior management misused the system, employing it as a means to assert authority rather than foster growth. He observed that some decision-makers reinforced their dominance by requiring academics to change their objectives to align with university plans. Furthermore, the requirement that academics prove their achievement through evidence and documentation created an environment of increased control and compliance. This indicates that the system prioritises bureaucratic compliance over meaningful progress, a view shared by others like Nasim and Rania.

Nasim and Rania highlighted how these compliance pressures affected teaching practice and well-being. Nasim emphasised the personal toll of meeting the Ejada targets, describing how the system affected her time management and workload beyond formal teaching hours. Rania pointed out the constant scrutiny experienced by staff under the appraisal system, noting that while it could promote accountability, it may instead foster a culture of anxiety and control rather than one of empowerment and professional development.

7.3.4 Recognition: Gaps and impact

Perhaps most significant was not simply that the appraisal system functioned subjectively or coercively. More concerning, all participants expressed uncertainty about whether a system for recognition or promotion existed. Furthermore, despite the QA framework's stated objectives, Ejada did not appear to facilitate the promotion process in any meaningful way. According to Criterion 4.5 of the QA framework, “staff achievements and exceptional performance are recognised through promotions and other incentives based on a model of equitable work distribution and merit” (OAAAQA, 2024a, p. 44). Despite the considerable time and effort invested in the appraisal process, seven participants across all branches identified significant gaps between evaluation activities and meaningful recognition.

Four participants identified a lack of transparency regarding how performance appraisal connected to rewards or recognition. This left them uncertain about the value of high performance. Malik articulated this uncertainty directly: "If I am doing very well, what do I get from it? It's not clear." Moeen echoed this concern, asking, "How will our efforts impact our chances for promotions or rewards?" John's experience also illustrated this disconnect. Despite achieving high performance in his appraisals, he received no meaningful recognition, leading to disappointment. He stated: "I thought we were evaluated to merit rewards later on, but the feedback from evaluations is often disregarded during award distributions."

Three participants reported limited recognition for high-performing staff. Noor stated: "I believe we have excellent staff who work very hard, but the level of appreciation they receive is minimal." Her observation identifies what she perceived as an imbalance between effort invested and recognition received. Aliya supported this view: “Regardless of the results, there’s no significant follow-up; high performers receive minimal recognition, and underperformers are rarely addressed.” Five participants reported that Ejada had initiated a mechanism to recognise and reward staff who received excellent outcomes; however, this appeared insufficient to address systematic gaps.

Bharat described disparities in how faculty achievements were recognised across departments, noting the absence of a standardised approach. He stated, “While opportunities for appreciation exist, they vary. One department may select the 'best faculty' based on overall performance, while another focuses on individual courses.” As he described, this lack of uniform criteria produced inequitable outcomes for some participants and conflicts with the QA framework's requirement that promotions and incentives be objective and evidence-based.

Limited recognition and lack of uniformity in rewarding academics created significant demotivation among staff. John's frustration intensified when he observed that the limited recognition available sometimes went to colleagues he perceived as underperforming: "It feels quite ironic and demotivates many staff members. How can you give credit to someone who is performing well when awarding someone who is underperforming? That was the real issue we faced."

Interestingly, while participants did not specifically refer to the appeals process, this absence in their reflections may likely reflect a deeper belief that appealing would not change the underlying issue: the lack of appreciation for academic staff. As a result, the appeal process may be seen as ineffective when the broader system fails to recognise merit or address inequities meaningfully.

John argued that these gaps in implementing the recognition system required urgent attention. He emphasised that failure to address them would have consequences for the university's accreditation status: "Hopefully, the university will improve this because the QA criteria are very clear regarding performance appraisals, promotions, and incentives. The university has to do this if it really needs to be accredited." This suggests that external accountability pressures, rather than internal commitment to fairness, may be necessary to drive meaningful change in recognition practices.

Participants' experiences with performance appraisal revealed a system that, despite its stated aims of enhancing teaching quality and recognising excellence, functioned primarily as a compliance mechanism. The convergence of subjective evaluation methods, compliance-oriented accountability pressures, and the absence of recognition systems transformed performance appraisal from a developmental tool into an administrative burden. While the QA framework positions appraisal as supporting teaching improvement, participants experienced it as documentation that satisfied external requirements while contributing minimally to actual pedagogical development. This disconnect between rhetoric and reality suggests that meaningful reform requires substantive shifts: from demonstrating compliance to supporting teaching improvement, from standardised documentation to contextualised feedback, and from bureaucratic oversight to authentic recognition of teaching excellence.

7.4 Professional development: Compliance with QA or meeting academic needs?

Almost all participants agreed that staff professional development received significant attention and effort at the university. This represents a significant change from past practices. Faiz noted, "When I first joined over ten years ago, the quality assurance system was not very active. During that time, professional development was handled differently." He recalled that professional development lacked specific procedures or mechanisms; instead, staff would present ideas, share recent publications, and discuss research activities, thereby exchanging knowledge informally and contributing to one another's development. Similarly, Noor explained that before QA's involvement, staff development activities were minimal. However, internal audits conducted by QA highlighted areas needing improvement, prompting increased efforts: "Before we had staff development, but it was very minimal. Now, compared to before, we have more than ten internal workshops to enhance the level of learning and knowledge." This shift from informal, collegial exchange to structured, institutionally mandated programming marked a transformation in how professional development was conceived and delivered.

Participants attributed this transformation to the QA framework's mandates, which explicitly address staff professional development as criterion 4.6 within Standard 4 (Human Resources). This criterion requires the HEI to systematically identify professional development needs through performance reviews and strategic goals, then provide tailored, well-funded training opportunities aligned with these needs. Four participants reported that the university integrated professional development into its strategic planning, key performance indicators, and departmental plans, making it a priority, with Abeer noting at least 70% of staff should participate in these programmes each semester, a metric that shows the shift from voluntary professional growth to mandated institutional compliance.

7.4.1 Institutional mechanisms and structures

To operationalise these QA requirements, six participants reported that the university branch established staff professional development committees in each academic department, which coordinated with the QA department to organise and manage professional development opportunities. Faris explained:

> A dedicated committee supervises this aspect of quality. This committee is responsible for developing and implementing its own action plan for staff professional development, based on the wider operational plan. As a result, professional development activities are scheduled annually.

Six participants across the branches described how the university mandated a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) to identify faculty needs across academic departments through a centralised, top-down approach. The TNA process appeared comprehensive on paper. Faiz noted that the QA department identified weaknesses by reviewing SET results and analysing staff survey responses on professional development needs in software skills, research capabilities, and participation in academic events. Staff development committees, which included input from external experts and industry professionals, then decided on training programmes to address identified weaknesses. Furthermore, Rania from Branch 2 and Zahra from Branch 3 added that Department heads could monitor and address shortcomings among lecturers through targeted professional development activities and recommend specific training programmes based on appraisal forms.

Despite these formal TNA mechanisms, a few participants from different branches reported limited familiarity with how professional development needs were actually identified in practice. Jalal noted the absence of a thorough analysis to help academic staff identify areas for improvement, while Taher expressed uncertainty about how feedback was collected and managed. This disconnect reveals that, while the TNA approach was implemented at the university-branch level to satisfy QA requirements, its communication and operationalisation remained inconsistent across departments, leaving some staff unaware of the processes that were intended to shape their professional development.

7.4.2 Intensification and mandatory burden

The QA framework's influence led to a significant increase in professional development activities, with five participants from all branches reporting substantial increases in frequency and structure. For example, Abeer stated:

> We have several staff development programmes in the first semester. Each week, we hold two sessions, taking advantage of a free slot on Tuesdays from 12 to 2 pm when no classes are scheduled. During this time, training workshops are conducted, making it a valuable opportunity for us. This period is now considered the golden time for our professional growth, offering us the chance to attend workshops and other activities. Previously, such structured opportunities were lacking, but now they are mandatory. Additionally, numerous online training sessions and workshops are now available.

Aliya also observed shifts in professional development:

> Professional development has become one of the primary activities we engage in every semester. Whether it is mandated by QA or has become

a way of life, we have seen enhancements in both the quantity and quality of professional development.

This increase, however, came at a high cost. Five participants across four branches, representing varied roles and specialisations, emphasised that professional development became mandatory, particularly when it was made a goal within the performance appraisal system, which assessed staff engagement in workshops and university-led activities. The mandatory nature of these activities created what participants described as coercive pressure driven more by institutional requirements and performance metrics than by professional needs or intrinsic motivation. Abeer's contradictory characterisation of the mandatory weekly slot, initially as a valuable "golden time" but later as a source of frustration, highlights this internal conflict. Despite efforts to maintain a positive outlook, she highlighted the practical challenge of balancing professional development with her existing workload, which included both teaching and administrative tasks. Faiz articulated the core issue more bluntly, explaining that staff had their own financial resources to attend and conduct professional development activities and publish papers, yet they lacked time. This reveals the irony of QA-driven professional development: while faculty possessed personal means to engage in these activities and participation was mandated, the actual constraint preventing meaningful engagement, namely, the lack of time, remained unaddressed.

7.4.3 Does it reflect academic needs?

While participants acknowledged that professional development activities aimed to improve teaching and research, their experiences revealed a misalignment between what was offered and what was needed to genuinely enhance teaching quality. This challenge emerged from the approach’s dual purpose: satisfying QA compliance requirements versus addressing academics’ development needs. This was most evident in the design and delivery of professional development opportunities. Eight participants from all branches recognised the theoretical value of continuous professional development. For example, Jalal recognised the value of professional development in improving teaching methods, enhancing personal development, and improving student outcomes. However, he noted that collaborative group work often provided more effective solutions to teaching challenges than formal professional development sessions.

Three participants from three different branches specifically discussed how professional development extended research activities. Taher highlighted that "they invite people from outside the organisation to deliver guest lectures and share their research interests with the faculty," thereby enriching the research environment. Abeer also supported this point:

> Staff development programmes have improved, especially in research. Many staff members are now involved in research because they are required to be researchers. One of the goals is for each staff member to have at least one publication by 2025, pushing everyone to conduct and publish research.

Sahar also recognised the value of research-focused professional development, noting its relevance for those supervising course projects and student research activities. She explained that certain trainings and workshops were essential not only for academics conducting their own research but also for those guiding students through research processes, suggesting that professional development in this area could enhance the quality of student supervision and project-based learning.

Zahra appreciated the QA framework's emphasis on establishing a mechanism for professional development within the university. She shared:

> I believe professional development, especially in my specialisation, is crucial because academic change is inevitable. As lecturers, it's essential to actively participate in ongoing professional activities to remain relevant and enhance competence in teaching new topics or technologies. They say you cannot give what you do not have, so it's important to continuously 'fill your cup' to always have knowledge to share with students. And if professional development is not supported in the organisation, we may remain stagnant. For academic staff, it

> becomes easier to engage in these activities when the institution management prioritises and supports professional development.

In addition to its impact on teaching and enhancing lecturers' knowledge within their field, three participants specifically discussed how professional development informs research activities. Taher from Branch 4 highlighted that "they invite people from outside the organisation to deliver guest lectures and share their research interests with the faculty," thereby enriching the research environment. Abeer from Branch 2 also supported this point:

> Staff development programmes have improved, especially in research. Many staff members are now involved in research because they are required to be. One of the goals is for each staff member to have at least one publication by 2025, pushing everyone to conduct and publish research.

Abeer explained that the university's branch senior management sought programmes that could meet the specific needs of its staff. These programmes varied widely across disciplines such as renewable energy, chemistry, and business, and even within engineering, depending on the department requirements. Staff members identified as having weaknesses in teaching were mandated to participate in targeted training sessions.

However, across all branches, more than half of the participants noted that professional development opportunities did not adequately reflect their academic needs or enhance their teaching effectiveness. The emphasis on compliance with QA requirements and on meeting key performance indicators shaped what was offered. Five participants explicitly stated that professional development activities were conducted primarily to increase key performance indicators set in the strategic plan rather than to improve teaching quality. This compliance-driven approach generated surface-level content, as Noor explained:

> Professional development activities are conducted to increase [key performance indicators] KPIs. In two hours, I have attended many sessions. Most of the sessions are more technical. I will not say that I have

> deep knowledge. I was introduced to new software and programmes, but they do not give me the level of knowledge I need, so I must continue learning on my own.

Taher described how generic professional development failed to address specialised teaching needs. Despite various specialisations within his department, general talks were organised for all staff rather than targeted sessions for specific groups. He explained:

> In the broader context, it may be less effective. At a technical university where academics specialise in various technical areas, my interest or motivation would be significantly lower if the lecture were not tailored to my specific field. I understand my limitations in these areas. The information shared in such sessions often doesn't enhance my existing knowledge because it's beyond my current scope.

This one-size-fits-all approach prioritised broad participation over relevant content, resulting in minimal improvement for those teaching specialised subject areas. John and Anwar from two different branches also shared concerns that professional development activities, such as workshops and training sessions, did not effectively enhance their teaching capabilities. John emphasised the need for specialised training, arguing that if lecturers did not upgrade their own skills, they could not effectively upgrade their students' skills, and questioned the impact of the current approach on teaching quality. Anwar used 3D printing workshops as an example: although potentially interesting, they were unrelated to his discipline and did not help him enhance his teaching skills. He emphasised that professional development should focus on improving discipline-specific knowledge rather than repeating generic content each semester to meet institutional metrics.

Beyond questioning relevance, participants challenged the main purpose of these activities. Several participants noted that workshops were intended to fulfil QA requirements, with content repeated semester after semester for documentation, regardless of effectiveness. Even when professional development did not align with teaching needs, participation remained mandatory and assessed in performance appraisals. This transformed professional development into what participants characterised as a box-ticking exercise, raising questions about whether the TNA process identified genuine needs or merely legitimised compliance-oriented programming.

Apart from academic teaching and research needs, four participants across all branches highlighted the lack of professional development opportunities for academics responsible for QA coordination and implementation. Nasim mentioned plans for QA-specific courses, such as internal audit training or Six Sigma certification for QA coordinators but noted they had not yet been implemented. Rania identified a need for more comprehensive training in QA tools and procedures: "Because of the lack of assessment tools and training, I feel that we are lagging behind, and we want some staff who should have all the knowledge about all QA procedures." She emphasised that staff with recognised credentials in QA systems could more effectively guide QA tasks. Bharat similarly observed that principles from lean management and Six Sigma, with their emphasis on clear roles and responsibilities, could strengthen the implementation of QA system.

7.4.4 External opportunities: Expectation vs. practice

Despite the QA framework's explicit emphasis on allocating sufficient financial resources for professional development, a gap emerged between policy rhetoric and institutional practice regarding external opportunities. One-third of participants across all branches reported that, while internal opportunities expanded to meet QA metrics, external professional development, potentially enhancing teaching capabilities through exposure to broader pedagogical innovations and disciplinary developments, remained largely inaccessible. This absence is particularly significant given that external training programmes, conferences, and collaborations with industry experts were identified as essential for professional growth, yet these very opportunities were systematically denied.

The participants identified a contradiction between QA requirements and institutional practice. While the framework emphasised allocating sufficient financial resources for professional development, the university invested primarily in low-cost, internally controlled activities that could be easily documented for audits. At the same time, support for more costly, externally oriented professional development, which could provide more teaching value, was largely withdrawn. Regardless of location, Zahra from Branch 3 explained that even when opportunities in nearby GCC countries required only transportation costs, the university typically did not provide financial support. Staff members who identified external training opportunities were expected to cover the costs themselves, including travel expenses. While the university might grant leave to attend, it rarely offered financial support for associated costs. Zahra gave an example: if a staff member needed to travel to Dubai for training, they must cover their own travel expenses. This financial strain significantly limited staff's ability to participate in valuable external professional development that could enhance teaching expertise and expose them to international best practices.

The shift from institutional investment to individual responsibility became particularly evident in participants' responses to how professional development had progressed over the past five years. Moeen from Branch 1 observed that the university had "rarely" provided external training or scholarships to academic staff during this period. This forced academic staff to adapt by independently seeking online courses. The example he provided of independently pursuing self-funded online courses to improve his teaching shows how individual initiative compensated for institutional disinvestment. Significantly, this self-initiated learning was "acknowledged in staff appraisals," revealing an institutional contradiction: while the university had withdrawn financial support for external professional development, it continued to evaluate and expect evidence of such development in performance appraisal.

The lack of external opportunities was frustrating for participants seeking to deepen their expertise to benefit their students. John drew a distinction between the roles he held, explaining that he was usually invited to contribute to a specific capacity but not as an attendee, which was what he actually sought. He emphasised that what the university should provide is "training outside the institution that would enhance our knowledge, particularly in the field of our specialisation", knowledge that directly benefits students. This was particularly evident in his experience, where access to external seminars and workshops had previously been available but was now notably absent.

Beyond financial constraints, the absence of institutional policy infrastructure further limited external engagement. Adil from Branch 3 highlighted missed opportunities that required no institutional funding, noting that institutions and academic staff from other countries had expressed a willingness to come to Oman as unpaid visiting faculty. These potential collaborators were prepared to process their own visas, cover airfare and accommodation, and stay for one to three months to conduct research and collaborate with local academic staff. Adil noted that such exchanges would benefit both academics and the university, for both national and international accreditation purposes. However, he observed, "Until now, we don't have such a clear policy on that. So, there are still a lot of things to be clarified and to put into the table of the policies that are implementing guidelines policies to involve external professional development." The policy gap extended to the establishment of international partnerships. Adil noted the continuing difficulty in securing memorandums of understanding with international HEIs. As Adil underlined, this prevented the university from taking advantage of opportunities that could significantly benefit teaching by exposing academics to diverse pedagogical approaches and international perspectives at minimal or zero institutional cost.

7.5 Summary of impacts

This chapter explored how QA processes and practices shaped key aspects of academic work, including teaching methods, assessment, performance appraisal, and professional development. The findings reveal a dual reality: while QA facilitated important improvements in consistency and quality across the university's branches, it also created significant challenges and gaps that limited the QA system’s effectiveness in enhancing academic work. Notably, despite each branch submitting ISA reports separately, the university's senior management made a concerted effort to establish uniform QA practices across all branches. This institutional commitment to standardisation meant that participants' experiences did not vary significantly between branches. Rather, the variations that emerged concerned different aspects of QA's impact on academic work, with all aspects showing both positive developments and persistent limitations.

Participants acknowledged perceived changes and improvements in teaching practices across three main aspects: curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices. However, these changes resulted from multiple intersecting factors rather than QA alone, including compliance with the QA framework, precautionary measures necessitated by COVID-19, and the need to stay current with technological advancements. This interplay of influences made it difficult to attribute improvements to QA implementation, though the QA framework shaped how changes were formalised and documented. The university enhanced academic integrity policies through tools like Turnitin for plagiarism detection and prevention. However, participants noted that this was driven by COVID-19-related necessity during the shift to online learning rather than by proactive QA planning. Despite these acknowledged improvements, participants identified significant gaps in infrastructure and resources to support teaching quality. Participants reported insufficient technological resources, inadequate training on new systems and tools, limited access to appropriate learning spaces, and a lack of technical support for implementing enhanced teaching approaches. Academic advising emerged as a particular area of concern where QA requirements generated additional administrative burden. The time required to document advising activities, maintain detailed records, and complete required reports was time that could otherwise be committed to teaching tasks.

Performance appraisal emerged as a contentious aspect of QA implementation, with participants expressing widespread dissatisfaction with the process, practices, and outcomes. The university developed appraisal practices aligned with QA framework requirements, integrating key mechanisms, such as SET and classroom observation, as core components of academic assessment. However, implementing these core practices revealed significant subjectivity and unfairness that undermined the credibility of the entire appraisal system. The situation became more complicated with the government's implementation of the Ejada system. Most participants believed that senior management attempted to integrate QA framework requirements directly into the Ejada platform, creating a performance appraisal structure that prioritised QA compliance over meaningful professional development. Participants questioned the relevance of appraisal outcomes, noting the limited connection between appraisal results and tangible benefits such as promotions, salary increases, or meaningful professional development opportunities. Even faculty who received positive appraisals reported that these outcomes rarely translated into rewards or recognition.

Professional development represented a contradictory area where QA-driven changes produced both improvements and frustrations. Participants acknowledged that professional development received far more attention following QA implementation than it had before. The establishment of staff development committees, implementation of the TNA process, and scheduling of regular workshops represented the university's investment in faculty development. Despite this intensification of professional development activities, significant gaps persisted in how well these opportunities addressed faculty needs. The most frequently cited concern was that professional development was designed to satisfy QA compliance requirements and meet key performance indicators set in both strategic and operational plans. Perhaps most significantly, while internal professional development was provided to satisfy QA metrics, institutional support for external professional development, such as conferences, specialised training, and international collaboration, remained limited.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION OF INTERWOVEN TENSIONS AND PERSISTENT QUESTIONS

The literature suggests a persistent tension between compliance and improvement, which deserves closer examination to understand how institutions balance external accountability with internal quality goals.

—F. Javier Miranda, *A Systematic Literature Review and a Research Agenda*

8.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters presented findings from interviews with 18 academic staff, highlighting a wide range of perspectives on quality assurance (QA) system at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). These varied viewpoints revealed several interwoven tensions and persistent questions that remain the subject of debate in the literature. This chapter begins with the key findings from Chapters 6 and 7, then discusses the impacts and tensions that academic staff encountered from the implementation of QA system.

8.2 Key Findings

The study identifies eight key findings:

1. There is a lack of consensus on the definition of QA, with most participants perceiving this primarily as a compliance-driven mechanism rather than a tool for educational improvement.

2. Although formal opportunities for involvement in the QA system exist at varying levels, such as drafting and feedback mechanisms, most participants perceived these as ritualistic exercises that marginalise genuine academic voice in QA decision-making. This highlights a significant gap between the university's rhetoric of inclusive participation and the reality of tokenistic involvement.

3. QA implementation imposes burdens on academics through multiple dimensions: extensive documentation requirements that consume time for teaching, non-interactive communication that creates information overload, and mandatory compliance activities in terms of professional development and performance appraisal.

4. The research reveals uncertainty and doubt over the attribution of perceived shifts in teaching methods and assessment strategies to the QA framework. Technological trends and the COVID-19 pandemic are concurrent factors that emerge as equally or more important external contextual forces.

5. Standardised teaching imposes rigid, procedural conformity that leaves little room for disciplinary variation or professional judgment, and is perceived as a threat to academic autonomy and freedom, and

6. An uneasy relationship characterises academics' engagement with the QA system, marked by compliance-driven rather than complete acceptance. Job security concerns, especially for non-Omani staff, constrain academic staff's willingness to resist or challenge QA practices, leading to strategic acquiescence, in which academics comply while holding private scepticism.

7. Quality teaching within the QA system is reduced to measurable metrics and numerical targets, regardless of whether these indicators reflect actual teaching quality. This emphasis on numerical compliance creates a culture where meeting targets supersedes meaningful improvement.

8. QA implementation within the university reveals power relations between management and academic staff. Managerial control, in which management determines, designs and enforces QA policies, teaching standards, assessment criteria, performance appraisal goals, and professional development activities, positions academics as subjects of surveillance and compliance instead of autonomous professionals, with their expertise marginalised in favour of managerial prerogatives.

Contextualising the findings: Interwoven tensions and persistent questions

The findings presented above reveal a complex terrain that extends beyond the specific context of the UTAS. These findings show interwoven tensions and persistent questions that have shaped QA debates globally for decades. Despite extensive research and the implementation of QA across diverse higher education systems, its impacts remain contested and unresolved. The tensions revealed in these findings underline contested QA conceptualisations, forms of academic engagement, uncertain pedagogical impacts, bureaucratic constraints on academic freedom and pressures toward conformity. This chapter explores each tension emerging from the findings within the broader global debates about QA in higher education.

8.3 Do academics' conceptualisations of QA matter?

The concept of QA holds different meanings for academics, depending on their roles, experiences, and the context in which they operate. This lack of consensus is unsurprising, as QA has long been and continues to be a contested concept (Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2024a; Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015). However, the significance of this multiplicity extends beyond definitional disagreement. As the findings reveal, the meanings participants attributed to QA centred on compliance, standardisation and external accountability, reflecting the structural and ideological conditions under which academics in the context of Oman encounter QA in practice and the implications for how they experience its impact on their academic work.

When participants described QA as a regulatory framework of standards and criteria tied to the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), they were not offering a neutral definition. They were reproducing a particular understanding of what quality means and who holds the authority to define it. This aligns with what Schindler et al. (2015) classified as a standards-driven, purposeful conceptualisation of quality, in which institutional products and services are judged against conformance to a predetermined set of specifications and requirements defined by accrediting or regulatory bodies. While Schindler et al. (2015) presented this as one of four broad conceptualisations of quality in the literature, what is analytically significant in the present findings is not the existence of this interpretation but its dominance. The fact that so many participants used regulatory and compliance language when asked to define QA suggests that the OAAAQA framework has successfully colonised the conceptual terrain within which participants understood their professional practice.

The consistency and standardisation interpretation of QA in higher education offered by some participants demands particular attention. On the surface, describing QA as a mechanism for ensuring consistency and standardisation across university branches and academic programmes appears professionally reasonable and even desirable. Yet Elassy (2015) traced the concept of quality as conformance to standards directly to its origins in manufacturing quality control, noting that this approach measures quality in terms of conformance to specifications, a logic imported from industry into higher education in the 1980s without sufficient interrogation of its educational appropriateness. Harvey (2024a) emphasised that quality, as consistency, entails the accurate execution of all stages of the process and assumes a stable, universally applicable benchmark of good practice.

The tension between improvement rhetoric and participants' actual experience is among the most significant findings in this study. Despite the ADRI (Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement) cycle positioning improvement as the foundational purpose of the Omani QA framework, only a minority of participants identified improvement as a defining feature of QA. As cited in Elassy (2015), Biggs (2001) differentiated between retrospective QA, which emphasises accountability through summative judgments against external standards, and prospective QA, which is oriented toward enhancing teaching and learning. Elassy's (2015) analysis suggested that, in practice, most QA systems operate in a retrospective mode, functioning as an assessment rather than a developmental function. The present findings reflect this clearly; participants experienced QA predominantly through its accountability and compliance functions, with improvement remaining, as Newton (2010) perceived, a distant second.

A revealing finding concerns participants' association of QA with industrial evaluation. This is not a conceptual curiosity; it reveals the roots of the QA discourse that participants internalised. As noted earlier, Elassy (2015) observed that QA was imported from business and industry into higher education in the 1980s, bringing with it a logic of standardisation and measurable metrics. The industrial conceptualisation thus does not misrepresent the nature of educational quality; it marginalises transformative, empowerment-oriented conceptualisations that most directly serve students' learning interests and excludes the kinds of professional conversations that might generate quality cultures rather than compliant performances of quality.

The question of whether academics' conceptualisations of QA matter cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Yet these findings reveal that what participants understood QA to be is not simply a matter of conceptual confusion or individual variation. It is a product of institutional and regulatory socialisation that has shaped which meanings of quality are available and expressible within the Omani academic context. Harvey (2024a) captured the consequence of this situation:

> While quality is conceptualised as something that can be controlled, something that can be defined by external requirements, something expressed in money terms, resistance will remain and buy-in will be negligible, lip-service and reluctant compliance. Quality assurance, like COVID, has engulfed the world but hasn't improved it. Change is overdue. (p. 179)

The challenge is not to seek a single, unified definition but to democratise the definitional process itself, ensuring that academics are positioned as legitimate knowledge producers in discussions about QA, rather than subjects of an externally imposed QA framework. As subsequent sections demonstrate, this definitional tension echoes throughout academics' experiences of QA implementation, shaping their engagement with the policy-making process, their responses to surveillance mechanisms, and their navigation of the performance appraisal system and professional development approaches. The QA concept remains inseparable from practice; how we define QA shapes how academics experience its impacts.

8.4 Academic voice in QA: Engagement or tokenism?

The findings presented in this section reveal a contradiction in the university's implementation of the QA system. Although the university implemented various mechanisms and channels for academic involvement in the QA system, including policy development, strategic planning, feedback surveys, committee representations, and preparation for Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA), the findings suggest these structures may function more as legitimation rituals than as genuine conduits for academic influence. This tension between participatory rhetoric and institutional reality is not incidental; it appears to be structurally embedded in how QA regimes reproduce themselves under external accountability pressures. When universities operate within a regulatory framework that demands demonstrable evidence of stakeholder engagement, the institutional purpose may tend toward producing participation as a visible, documentable output rather than as a consultative process. The system rewards the appearance of what it does not easily measure, and therefore does not structurally incentivise, whether that engagement was substantive or whether academic expertise meaningfully shaped decisions. In this sense, tokenistic participation is not a deviation from the system's logic but an expression of it.

This previous finding links directly with Newton's (2000) identification of the 'implementation gap' between the intentions underpinning quality policy and the actual outcomes experienced by frontline academics (p. 154). In his case study of NewColl, Newton (2000) demonstrated that while staff at all levels concurred that external and internal accountability requirements had been met, accountability and improvement had not been reconciled. Quality at the level of management objectives appeared as managerialism and accountability, whereas at the operational level, academics construed and constructed quality very differently. The result was a system that generated procedural compliance without improvement, reflecting the UTAS context. More than two decades later, Harvey's (2024c) analytical synthesis confirmed that this tension remains unresolved across the global higher education sector, with QA having developed a path of its own that fails to align with academic expectations, leading to over-management and increasing preoccupation with compliance at the expense of genuine learning improvement. The persistence of this trend across time and contexts is analytically significant; it suggests the problem is not one of implementation failure but of the structural orientation of QA systems themselves.

The findings show that academics at UTAS were not entirely silenced; instead, their voices were channelled through formal mechanisms that dictate when, where, and how they may contribute. This is what Newton (2000) characterised as 'feeding the beast': quality monitoring invested with a presence that requires ritualistic practices by academics seeking to meet accountability requirements rather than improve quality. Newton’s (2000) research found that academics develop strategic coping mechanisms to satisfy QA procedural requirements superficially, without genuine engagement; one academic termed this “playing the game” (p. 155). The timing of feedback requests at UTAS, concentrated during peak periods such as the end of semester, when cognitive and professional attention is most constrained, reflects this logic. The structural effect, whatever the intent, is to generate participation statistics while minimising the probability of substantive challenge. This is institutional performance posing as consultation.

Newton's (2002a) follow-up study developed a taxonomy of academic responses to QA that closely reflects the study findings. Ranging from the ‘intransigent’ to ‘colonised’, ‘pragmatic sceptic’, ‘coping’, and ‘reconstructing’, these categories reveal that frontline academics are neither passive recipients nor uniform resisters of QA policies. The ‘colonised’ response is particularly echoed in the findings of my research. The majority of participants had fallen in with the system, doing what was required not out of conviction but because the institutional structure left little alternative, without any sense of ownership over the processes they enacted. Harvey (2024c), reviewing this taxonomy thirty years on, confirmed that academic staff have hardly been won over by QA, and that while there may be less obvious resistance, this does not mean academics have bought into the processes or feel any ownership. For most, QA remains a bureaucratic burden that erodes autonomy, especially when it takes the form of prescriptions about how academic activities should be conducted.

When academic input on draft policies and QA tasks was ignored or undervalued, participants in my study felt demotivated and reluctant to provide further feedback. This withdrawal constitutes a recognised form of resistance (Anderson, 2006; Overberg, 2019) and signals a fragility of ownership over QA processes (Cardoso et al., 2018). Academics cannot refuse to participate, but they can withhold full engagement, provide minimalist feedback, or comply with procedural requirements while withdrawing meaningful contribution. Overberg (2019) found that in Finnish higher education, subtle forms of resistance, avoidance and qualified compliance are common, with resistance tending to be silent and subtle rather than organised and open yet remaining rooted in the defence of academic values and autonomy. This characterisation aligns closely with the research findings, which reveal not confrontation but calibrated disengagement, driven by the rational calculation that investment in processes perceived as inconsequential is professionally wasteful.

Cardoso' et al. (2018) surveyed Portuguese academics on their participation in study programmes accreditation and showed precisely what they termed 'partial withdrawal' and 'distance' from participation when institutional actions failed to value academic input, with participation levels remaining low and passive and academics viewing QA as an external imposition with which they did not identify. Resistance was pragmatic rather than principled, reflecting Newton's (2000) earlier claim that academics adopt a colonised position, going along with the system because they must rather than because they believe in it. Anderson (2006) extended this argument, showing that Australian academics experienced QA mechanisms as actively undermining their professional values, replacing academic notions of quality as excellence with what they saw as instrumental, minimalist and mediocre substitutes, to the point where assuring quality had come to mean resisting QA itself. She concluded that game-playing would persist until there is real alignment between academic and managerial conceptions of quality.

The fragile ownership and strategic disengagement documented in my study are not exclusive to Omani higher education; they are a global phenomenon that emerges when QA systems operate through external compliance rather than through professional values. Evidence from the UK (Newton, 2000, 2002a), Australia (Anderson, 2006), and Europe (Cardoso et al., 2018; Overberg, 2019) reveals similar academic responses: strategic compliance and performative engagement. This cross-national consistency suggests that academic disengagement is a consequence of the misalignment between accountability-oriented QA systems and academic professional values

The findings also reveal how academics can engage in collective action when formal channels prove inadequate. One participant reported that when academics encountered problems with institutional policies, they collectively documented their concerns, mobilised collegial support by gathering signatures, and submitted consolidated feedback to management. Rather than representing exceptional behaviour, this action is better understood as organised resistance, deliberate, coordinated, and purposeful, as Newton (2000, 2002a) recognised, situated at the more active end of the academic response field. Newton's (2002a) ‘reconstructing’ category captures precisely this behaviour, in which academics move beyond passive coping or minimalist compliance towards actively shaping the conditions of their engagement with QA (p. 55). However, the fact that meaningful results required collective action rather than individual participation raises a crucial question about the adequacy of those participatory mechanisms. If academic voices, channelled through those feedback mechanisms, are ignored or undervalued, collective organising becomes not an unusual measure but a rational, strategic response.

The central question is not whether academics should be involved in QA but how to transform their involvement from tokenistic compliance into authentic engagement. The current lack of meaningful participation undermines ownership, revealing that genuine ownership requires academic involvement, not in responding to developed policies but in shaping those policies. This transformation demands an institutional redirection, including transparency about how academic input influences decisions, openness to perspectives that challenge existing QA frameworks, a willingness to revisit core assumptions about quality in response to academic concerns, and recognition that QA should serve professional academic values rather than satisfy external compliance requirements. Without such consideration, the gap between participatory rhetoric and tokenistic reality will continue widening, eroding academic trust and deepening the fragile ownership that characterises engagement with superficially participatory QA processes. This reality, which is evident at UTAS and across global higher education, ultimately threatens QA's credibility and undermines its potential to foster meaningful improvements in academic work.

8.5 Perceived changes in teaching: QA or converging forces?

A central tension in the QA literature concerns whether formal accountability systems improve teaching or create the appearance of doing so. The findings of this study further press that question as participants reported meaningful changes in their teaching practices yet consistently resisted attributing those changes to QA. Instead, three converging forces emerged as the drivers of change: the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological transformation, and the UTAS merger. This is consistent with post-pandemic research demonstrating how crisis conditions and technological acceleration have reshaped higher education in ways that challenge attribution to QA systems (Hou et al., 2022a, 2022b; Kara, 2021; Mok, 2022; Mottiar et al., 2024; Ngo & Phan, 2023; Selkrig et al., 2024). This section argues that these forces did not simply operate alongside QA; in several respects, they exposed QA's limitations as a mechanism for pedagogical development, revealing a system oriented more toward compliance than toward improvement.

Crisis over compliance: COVID-19 and assessment reform

Perhaps the most revealing finding concerns what happened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit: formal QA processes were bypassed, but this was due to a significant pedagogical innovation. This is not an isolated observation. Mottiar et al. (2024) examining assessment strategy changes across an Irish university during the pandemic, found that 95% of academics changed their assessment practices when compliance structures were temporarily lifted, with many introducing innovations they had previously considered but felt unable to implement within normal QA structures. This study's findings echo that experience.

Participants described how the pandemic prompted the university to develop alternative approaches to teaching and assessment that QA audit cycles had previously flagged as areas for improvement but had not yet addressed. The shift toward assignments requiring critical thinking and analytical skills, designed and marked by academics themselves, represented pedagogical development. So too did the adoption of Turnitin and the subsequent development of academic integrity policies. These were not QA-driven improvements; they were crisis-driven ones. The QA system had identified the gaps. It took a global emergency to close them.

One participant went further, personally allocating five participation marks to incentivise student engagement with the external platform; a workaround motivated by concern about the gap between institutional curricula and labour market demands. That such an initiative required working around institutional structures is indicative of a real issue. Selkrig et al. (2024) underlined this as a structural tension inherent in compliance-oriented QA: the very mechanisms designed to ensure quality, (standardisation, outcome-focus and auditing), can constrain the professional creativity that effective teaching requires. The conclusion that emerges from this study's findings is uncomfortable but difficult to dismiss: if meaningful pedagogical change only occurs when QA frameworks are bypassed or suspended, the system has ceased to function as a mechanism for change; it is a constraint on it.

Academic integrity: The gap between policy and culture

A second significant finding concerns academic integrity specifically, the persistent gap between institutional policy development and cultural embedding. The university invested effort in developing academic integrity policies in response to COVID-19, introducing plagiarism-detection tools and student misconduct procedures, thereby representing a clear institutional commitment to addressing an identified gap. The QA framework had flagged academic integrity as a concern prior to the pandemic. Yet it was the external crisis that generated the urgency and institutional flexibility necessary to act.

What followed, however, exposes the limits of compliance-driven policy implementation. Despite the policy infrastructure put in place, participants described implementation as uneven and incomplete. Staff training was inadequate, enforcement of penalties was inconsistent, communication across the institution was insufficient, and the cultural development necessary to make policies meaningful was largely absent. Students encountered academic integrity requirements as abrupt and punitive rather than as part of an embedded institutional culture of honesty. Reedy et al. (2021) identified a similar situation in Australian universities, where pandemic-forced transitions to online delivery necessitated rapid policy implementation that prioritised compliance documentation over culture-building. Both cases reveal the same limitation: formal policy frameworks and detection tools are insufficient when the professional infrastructure and cultural conditions to sustain them are absent.

This limitation is not a resourcing problem; it reflects a greater underlying limitation of compliance-driven QA systems. Developing a policy is measurable and auditable. Building a culture of academic integrity is neither quick nor easily evidenced. As AI-generated work and what Waqas et al. (2025) termed AIgiarism introduces new and rapidly progressing forms of misconduct, the inadequacy of static, compliance-oriented responses becomes even more apparent. Without the kind of adaptive, culturally embedded responsiveness that quality enhancement requires, the policy-practice gap will continue to widen regardless of the tools and frameworks deployed.

Professional development: Provision and KPI demands

The pandemic's influence on professional development reveals a similar gap between compliance requirements and practical effectiveness, though in a different form. Participants reported attending more professional development sessions during and after the pandemic than before, a quantitative increase that might appear, on the surface, as evidence of improved provision. Yet participants described these sessions not as a response to their developmental needs but as an institutionally convenient mechanism for meeting key performance indicator requirements (KPIs) at minimal cost.

With funding for external professional development significantly constrained, the university relied heavily on free or low-cost online sessions to fulfil its QA obligations. The result was a form of performative compliance. The volume of professional development activity increased but it lacked relevance to individual academic needs. This finding is consistent with earlier work in the Omani Colleges of Applied Sciences (CASs) context, where Al Aufi[1] (2014) and Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020) identified persistent gaps between professional development provision and its actual impact on teaching quality. This exposes a gap between what professional development claims to offer and what it delivers: growth in the language and compliance in the practice.

The UTAS merger: Alignment as a driver of change

The merger that unified the former Colleges of Technology (CoTs) and Colleges of Applied Sciences (CASs) added another layer of intersecting institutional forces. By bringing diverse campus cultures and curriculum practices under a unified QA framework, the merger created significant pressure to realign programmes with national and international accreditation standards, pressure that drove curriculum review, restructuring, and standardisation across the institution. In this respect, the merger aligned with QA requirements, using national accreditation standards as the normative framework for institutional merging.

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[1] This reference refers to Mohammed Al Aufi and not to the thesis author. See the reference list for full details.

This reflects what Stensaker and Leiber (2015) described as the challenge of isolating QA's impact from other concurrent reform processes. Organisational change in universities rarely results from a single cause, and the UTAS merger generated precisely the kind of isomorphic pressure that can produce curriculum reform. The merger did not replace QA; rather, it mobilised the kind of institutional momentum, raising questions about whether external structural pressures are more effective drivers of change than internal accountability frameworks.

Performance appraisal: Overlapping governance

Performance appraisal at UTAS sits at the intersection of two different but mutually emphasising governance frameworks. On one hand, the OAAAQA requirements mandate systematic evaluation of teaching quality through formal appraisal mechanisms. On the other hand, the Ejada system, introduced by the Ministry of Labour in January 2022, embeds performance appraisal within a governmental human resource governance framework tied to financial budgeting and promotion. According to the participants, overlap between alignment with QA requirements and Ejada objectives creates a combined compliance burden, leaving limited space for the reflective, developmental engagement that teaching improvement requires.

Al-Maawali and Al Siyabi (2020) found that performance appraisal in the CASs, relying primarily on student feedback, failed to generate the constructive, developmental input necessary to support academic growth. It functioned as a summative judgment rather than a formative developmental process. This experience is not exclusive to the Omani context. Anderson (2006), in a study of thirty academics across ten Australian universities, found that performance appraisal, including student evaluation of teaching, had shifted from a formative process to a compliance mechanism; one that academics experienced as bureaucratic rather than professional, and which generated little meaningful feedback to inform teaching improvement. The present study corroborates these findings and underlines that neither the transition to UTAS nor the introduction of Ejada as a governmental governance mechanism has resolved this gap. If anything, the addition of a governmental performance management system has intensified it. This condition is characteristic of new public management in higher education. The proliferation of overlapping accountability mechanisms creates a governance structure in which the performance of compliance displaces the practical professional work it is meant to support (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014; Reed, 2002).

These findings do not suggest that QA is irrelevant; they suggest that it has been overtaken by its own accountability, reducing its improvement mandate to a formal commitment that is rarely realised in practice. This is particularly significant in the Omani and GCC context, where QA frameworks are explicitly designed to serve both accountability and improvement as equally weighted purposes. The persistent gap between these two functions, as this study demonstrates, is not an incidental limitation but a challenge that QA frameworks must adequately address.

8.6 QA bureaucracy: Stifling academic freedom?

One of the most significant findings of this study is the extent to which QA bureaucracy eroded academic freedom at HEIs. Academic freedom, broadly understood as the right of academics to teach and conduct research without undue external interference, is regarded as both a cornerstone of higher education and a precondition for educational quality (Abbott et al., 2018; Ashraf et al., 2024; Holt, 2020; Romanowski & Nasser, 2010). Yet the findings of this study reveal that the QA system operated according to a different institutional rationale, one that prioritised external audit, standardised compliance, and managerial oversight over the academic freedom that academic work requires.

Among the mechanisms by which QA bureaucracy constrained academic freedom at UTAS, standardisation proved persistent. The mandating of uniform assessments, prescribed learning outcomes, standardised templates, and procedural compliance criteria narrowed the academic freedom granted to academics in designing and delivering their teaching. This finding aligns with Holt's (2021) critique of accreditation-driven reductionism, in which the inherently multidimensional and contextual qualities of teaching and learning are reduced to quantifiable outputs, with metrics and matrices coming to define academic value rather than the quality of academic practice. The findings of my research show that for most participants teaching shifted an independently driven practice toward to the execution of QA procedures, displacing the contextual judgement and disciplinary expertise that distinguish professional academics from curriculum deliverers.

Effective teaching is, by its very nature, a responsive practice. It requires attentiveness to the specific learners in a given classroom, sensitivity to emerging developments in a discipline, and the capacity to adapt pedagogy to the institutional and cultural context. Standardisation reduces this responsiveness by privileging uniformity over contextual adaptation and procedural compliance over professional autonomy. Romanowski and Nasser (2010) examined faculty perceptions in one GCC university and found that authoritarian cultural and institutional pressures shaped the boundaries of academic work, limiting what academics felt able to teach, discuss, and question in their professional practice. In the context of Oman, the practical conditions for meaningful academic work are constrained by institutional structures that prioritise conformity with the QA system. Holt (2021) also argued that accreditation-driven compliance socialises new faculty away from commitments to academic freedom and shared governance, instead preparing them to follow administrative directives without any scrutiny. This concern is echoed in my research findings, which show that academics experienced a gradual normalisation of compliance, a process through which the reduction of professional autonomy simply becomes the way things are done, rather than a breach of professional rights. The effect is what can be characterised as the deprofessionalisation of academic work: a structural transformation in which the expertise and judgment that define professional practice are displaced by procedural conformity and managerial control.

A second significant mechanism through which QA bureaucracy constrains academic freedom is the increase in surveillance and monitoring. Academic freedom has historically depended upon an implicit institutional trust, the assumption that academics, as credentialed and qualified professionals, can be relied upon to conduct their work responsibly without continuous external oversight. The QA system, however, operates on a different rationale: it assumes that quality must be externally audited through observation and documentation, and that professional standards cannot be maintained without systematic monitoring. The participants reported exposure to multiple and overlapping forms of surveillance: regular internal audits, course file documentation requirements, classroom observations, centrally collected and analysed student evaluations, and moderation practices. Individually, each of these mechanisms may be defended on grounds of accountability or quality improvement. However, they establish what Romanowski (2022b) described as a culture of compliance, in which accreditation and QA systems use standardisation and accountability as methods of control that govern academic conduct not through direct coercion but through internalised habits of self-monitoring and self-regulation. This has direct consequences for academic freedom. When academics understand that their work is under continuous scrutiny and measured against externally defined criteria, they are less likely to experiment, innovate, or challenge established practices. Holt (2020) reinforced this concern, arguing that the accreditation process distances faculty from their core academic responsibilities by reducing them to employees who perform compliance tasks in a prescribed order, leaving them with little academic freedom over their professional activities. The burden of compliance work, he contended, displaces the free inquiry, free teaching, and research engagement that define meaningful academic practice.

Professional development represents a related domain of constraint. Academic freedom encompasses not only autonomy in current practice but the freedom to develop professionally in directions academics themselves judge to be valuable, pursuing new pedagogical approaches, engaging with research on teaching and learning, and progressing as academics over the course of their careers. Within the UTAS context, however, the findings reveal that the QA system increasingly imposed what counts as legitimate professional development, constraining professional learning toward compliance-oriented training and away from the intellectual development academics identify as professionally meaningful. This finding is consistent with studies of professional development in Omani higher education contexts (Al Aufi, 2014; Al-Maawali & Al Siyabi, 2020), which similarly identify the narrowing of professional development opportunities under audit culture as a significant constraint on academic freedom and autonomy.

A particularly revealing dimension of my findings points to the COVID-19 pandemic as a driver of pedagogical innovation. Participants attributed meaningful advances in teaching and assessment to the pandemic rather than to the QA system, and in several cases identified QA bureaucratic processes as impeding the rapid responsiveness and creative adaptation the pandemic demanded. This points to a significant institutional irony: the system designed to ensure educational quality proved less capable of generating innovation than the crisis conditions that temporarily suspended its normal operation. Ngo and Phan (2023) argued that the post-pandemic period presents an opportunity for Vietnam to rethink its QA system, moving toward more flexible, hybrid, and student-centred approaches that can better accommodate the realities of blended learning and future crises. Their overall argument is that compliance-oriented, externally driven QA systems are structurally ill-equipped to support the kind of rapid, context-sensitive adaptation that genuine educational quality requires

To conclude, when QA is structured around compliance, surveillance, and performative accountability, it systematically erodes the professional autonomy upon which academic quality depends. Academics who cannot exercise independent judgment in their teaching and professional development cannot deliver the responsive, innovative, and stimulating education that HEIs exist to provide. This study shows that at UTAS, QA bureaucracy produced this outcome, not through intentional design, but through QA framework compliance. This is, arguably, a feature of compliance-oriented QA. Once accountability is defined through standardisation and measurable outputs, the displacement of professional judgment is not an accidental side effect but a structural consequence. A QA system built on compliance rationale cannot, by its own internal reasoning, accommodate the academic freedom and autonomy it measures against. The pandemic demonstrated that rapid pedagogical adaptation is possible when HEIs permit it, and that trust-based, improvement-focused QA frameworks can be designed that preserve rather than undermine academic autonomy.

8.7 QA as a driver towards institutional conformity?

The findings from this research reveal a challenging environment in which the QA system appears as a structural force that steers academic staff towards institutional conformity. QA policies and practices within UTAS actively reshape academic behaviour, professional practice, and institutional culture in ways that prioritise compliance over teaching quality. A clear and consistent process of standardisation emerged across the research findings, evident across university branches and academic departments alike. This process became especially apparent during and after the university's merger project, when institutional management intensified efforts to unify operations under a QA framework. Standardised procedures were introduced across teaching practices, performance appraisal systems, and professional development programmes, with strategic planning tools such as the Balanced Scorecard and key performance indicators deployed to enforce uniformity across the university. While such tools were officially framed as mechanisms for promoting consistency and quality, the findings revealed that they exercised regulatory control over academic work. This closely aligns with Ball's (2003) concept of performativity, which identified contemporary governance in higher education as increasingly colonised by targets, indicators, and evaluative mechanisms that displace substantive professional judgment.

This change toward standardisation reflects field-level pressures that push HEIs toward homogenisation far beyond the boundaries of any single institution. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explained the mechanisms through which this occurs, identifying coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism as three distinct but overlapping pathways through which HEIs come to be similar to one another over time (as cited in Istileulova, 2018). In the context of UTAS, all three mechanisms are simultaneously at work. Coercive isomorphic pressures emanate from government mandates, accreditation requirements, and the imposition of public-sector performance management systems such as Ejada, as well as from external authorities that compel institutional conformity through regulatory force. Mimetic pressures drive the university to model itself on perceived best practices from peer-accredited HEIs, particularly during the merging project, when replicating established practices appears to offer institutional legitimacy and security. Normative pressures are transmitted through professional networks, QA bodies, and international rankings that promote particular standards and practices as legitimate expressions of QA. The danger inherent in these isomorphic pressures is captured in what Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) termed the "conformity trap" (p. 453), a condition characterised by the erosion of differentiated, context-sensitive institutional responses in favour of standardised practices whose function is to satisfy external accountability demands rather than drive internal quality improvement.

The tension between symbolic compliance and enacted engagement is central to understanding the conformity mechanisms identified in my research. The increasing number of QA mechanisms, including key performance indicators, training logs, performance appraisals, and documentation, creates an audit culture in which being measured and recorded becomes normalised as a defining condition of academic life. Shore and Wright (2015) demonstrated that audit cultures in higher education do not only monitor academic behaviour but also reconstruct it, displacing professional judgement with measurable performance criteria. Drawing on Miller (2001), they argued that the effect is to produce individuals whose academic work becomes oriented toward what is measurable and institutionally legible to the QA system, rather than toward what is educationally valuable or professionally meaningful (as cited in Shore and Wright, 2015). Conformity, in this regard, may not only be an unintended outcome of QA but could also reflect a structural rationale embedded within its design.

In my study, institutional conformity is especially apparent in the domain of professional development. Participants across all branches described being transformed from a meaningful opportunity for growth into a standardised compliance exercise, absorbed into the strategic planning, training needs analysis, and key performance indicators controlled by the QA department. Mandatory scheduling of professional development into a compulsory weekly slot reduced professional engagement to a performative exercise in institutional visibility, constraining academics' autonomy over when, how, and why development occurred. This also supports Ball's (2003) performativity priority, in which the appearance of compliance becomes more institutionally valuable. As mentioned earlier, this reflects coercive isomorphism at its most damaging. The adoption of homogenised practices is driven by the institutional need to maintain external legitimacy rather than by meaningful responsiveness to the diverse professional needs of academic communities (Istileulova, 2018).

8.8 Beyond perceptions: Omani QA system through a Foucauldian lens

This research aimed to examine academics' perceptions of the QA system and its impact on academic work at a public university in Oman. It was not designed through a Foucauldian theoretical framework, however, as the findings were synthesised and the discussion developed, it became evident that the QA system itself operates as a mechanism of power. How the QA system defines what counts as quality, how it shapes academic behaviour, how it enforces conformity, and how it makes academic work continuously visible, resonates with Foucauldian conceptualisations of power, knowledge, and governmentality.

Foucault (1980) conceptualised power and knowledge as inextricably linked, arguing that power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power. Applied to the UTAS QA system, this means the system does not neutrally assess quality; it generates a regime of truth (Morrissey, 2013) about academic performance, a set of evaluative practices that define the boundaries of acceptable academic work. Within this regime, documentation, audit reports, and key performance indicators become the authoritative evidence of quality, while the professional judgement of academics is subordinated. This is not a neutral technical arrangement; it is a political one that concentrates definitional power within management and the QA governing body while excluding academics from shaping the standards by which their work is judged (Romanowski, 2022).

The finding that senior management determined and enforced QA policies, teaching standards, assessment criteria, and professional development activities may not be a side effect of the QA system at UTAS; it may be constitutive of how the system operates. Academics are positioned not as contributors to quality but as implementers of externally defined standards. This managerial arrangement instantiates what Ball (2003) termed performativity. It is a mode of governance in which academic value is determined by outputs, rankings, and measures rather than by the intrinsic quality of professional practice. Under the regime of performativity, academics are required to render their work visible and measurable, aligning their activities with institutional metrics that may be disconnected from their professional values

In a recent study conducted at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) in Mexico, Montano Durán (2025) underlined that performance-based metrics, global rankings, and digital surveillance reshaped academic identities over decades. Institutional discourse praised modernisation and excellence while marginalising collegial governance and academic autonomy. The "good academic" (p. 670) was constructed as someone who conformed to managerial objectives, maintained strong evaluation scores, and contributed to upward institutional metrics. This aligns with the situation at UTAS, where the QA system's documentation requirements and audit processes define academic legitimacy in terms of procedural compliance rather than disciplinary expertise. These two geographically and culturally distinct contexts suggest that managerialism as a mode of governance follows a structural logic wherever it takes root in higher education.

Foucault's (1977) analysis of the panopticon as an architecture of disciplinary power rests on a deceptively simple insight: that the possibility of being observed at any moment is more effective as a mechanism of control than actual, continuous surveillance. The panopticon works because those within it can never be certain whether they are being watched, and this uncertainty produces self-regulation. Bentham's architectural model has become, for Foucault, a metaphor for the diffuse operation of disciplinary power across modern institutions. These institutions do not rely on overt coercion; instead, they produce compliant, "docile" subjects through the internalisation of the observer's gaze. The QA system in the context of Oman can be seen as operating along similar panoptic lines.

The mechanisms of internal audits, key performance indicators monitoring, teaching evaluations, exam moderation, annual reports and documentation requirements ensures that all aspects of academic work at UTAS are visible to institutional review. Academics know that their course materials are auditable, that their teaching evaluations are recorded and that their professional development activities are tracked. This shapes their academic work in ways that go beyond simple compliance with specific requirements; it produces a form of academic self-censorship, in which academics orient their work toward what is auditable rather than toward what is educationally valuable or intellectually challenging.

What is particularly noteworthy about the UTAS context is the way in which the absence of institutional practices interacts with the specific discursive framing of the QA system. In institutions where collegial governance practices are strong, the managerial discourse of QA must negotiate with alternative discourses, of academic freedom, disciplinary autonomy, and collegial self-regulation, that can contest its claims and limit its jurisdiction. At UTAS, these alternative discourses appear to have little institutional power. The QA framework is not simply the dominant; it is, for most practical purposes, the only institutionally recognised approach. This discursive monopoly is itself a form of power, one that Foucault's analysis of regimes of truth is equipped to illuminate: when a system succeeds in making its own categories appear natural and inevitable, it has achieved the deepest form of power.

The interaction of neoliberal QA rationalities with centralised governance cultures thus produces a convincing form of academic managerialism. Neoliberal mechanisms privileging audit cultures, accountability and measurable outcomes do not arrive at UTAS as alien impositions; they find in the centralised governance practices an institutional environment already organised around hierarchical authority, structurally marginalised collegial challenge, and an embedded expectation of compliance. The two logics, neoliberal managerialism and centralised governance, do not merely coexist; they reinforce one another, producing a form of institutional control over academic work that is more total than either would generate alone. The result is not simply a QA system that is more demanding; it is a QA system whose disciplinary power encounters fewer institutional resistances and is therefore more thoroughly installed across the full range of academic work.

A Foucauldian analysis cannot rest at the description of power's operations; it must also attend to the question of resistance. For Foucault (1982), power and resistance are not opposites but constitutive of one another. Wherever power operates, resistance is possible because power operates precisely by structuring a field of possible actions; and any structured field of possible actions includes the possibility of acting otherwise. The question is not whether resistance exists at UTAS, but what forms it takes, what conditions make it possible or impossible, and what its relationship is to the broader politics of academic subjectivation.

These connections point toward significant opportunities for future research that would adopt a Foucauldian framework to investigate the Omani QA system as a technology of power. Such research might address questions this study has raised but cannot fully answer: How does the QA system operate as a technology of power/knowledge? How do governmentality and neoliberal rationalities interact with centralised GCC governance cultures? How does disciplinary power produce specific forms of academic subjectivity, particularly among contractually vulnerable expatriate academics? And how do academics resist these technologies of power in ways not visible through perception-based research?

8.9 Summary: The ongoing dialogue

The tensions surrounding QA in higher education continue to persist and are widely debated. Instead of being resolved, they continue to develop as the university policymakers and senior management grapple with conflicting priorities, the pressure to meet external standards, and various interpretations of what quality truly requires. Although QA is presented as a process meant to promote accountability and improvement, its real-world implementation often raises doubts about its actual purpose and effect. From the perspectives of participants and the literature across various research contexts, it is evident that QA, as a concept and an aspect, consistently articulates its goals. However, in practice, it is implemented in ways that place pressure on academics and institutions. Rather than encouraging development, QA frequently functions as a control mechanism, shifting the focus from improvement to mere compliance.

In practice, QA implementation often results in institutional conformity, with the primary focus shifting from enhancing teaching and learning to meeting accreditation bodies' requirements. Academics frequently report feeling pressured to comply with QA measures, with their professional judgement and expertise marginalised in favour of standardised procedures. This creates a paradox: while QA is portrayed as fostering improvement and creativity, its compliance mechanisms can instead restrict autonomy, undermine academic freedom, and reduce teaching practices to bureaucratic box-ticking. Williams (2025) highlights this outcome through the concept of ritualised compliance, where conformity to QA processes becomes routine and symbolic, carried out because it is expected rather than because it produces meaningful change. This pattern of compliance was first discussed by Barrow (1999) in his concept of dramaturgical compliance, which describes a performance of alignment with QA demands that conceals underlying resistance or disengagement. The pattern of compliance has been revisited and debated across various research contexts (Anderson, 2006; Newton, 2002a; Overberg, 2019).

The past 30 years have seen change and growth in higher education, with quality considerations underpinning almost every major shift. However, these developments have generated significant tensions rather than solving issues. This discussion chapter has highlighted and confirmed that these tensions arise across multiple conflicting aspects: between enhancement and accountability practices, between institutional standardisation and academic freedom, and between quality audits and professional judgment.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

For if quality assurance is about anything meaningful, it is not about checking up on compliance to bureaucratic regulation, nor a conservative reassertion of staid reputation or how governments can save money; if quality assurance is worth doing, it must be geared towards investment in future improvement. Not simply enhancing what's there (like shining the silver), but fundamental improvement of learning and research—of becoming truly transformative.

—Lee Harvey, *Extended Editorial: Defining Quality Thirty Years on*

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the key findings presented in the previous chapters in relation to the research questions. It also offers recommendations for policy and practice, acknowledges the research limitations, identifies areas for future research and ends with final reflections.

9.2 Impacts of QA on academic work

This study set out to understand how quality assurance (QA) processes, policies, and practices impact academic work in higher education. The previous chapters examined this overarching question from multiple perspectives, exploring the experiences, influences, and challenges that arise when QA intersects with academic life. Drawing on the findings presented in previous chapters, this section synthesises the key insights in response to the four research questions:

- How do academic staff define and conceptualise QA in higher education?
- How do academic staff perceive and experience the implementation of QA processes, policies and practices within the university?
- How do academics perceive the impact of QA processes, policies and practices on their teaching, professional development, and performance evaluation?
- What benefits and challenges do academics encounter in assuring teaching quality within a centrally regulated national QA system?

The research held mixed perceptions of QA outcomes, shaped by their direct experiences of implementing and navigating a centralised QA framework. Although these participants recognised benefits such as improved academic integrity policies, curriculum development, assessment practices, and greater emphasis on graduate attributes and student-centred approaches, their day-to-day experiences revealed significant tensions. The QA system was perceived as serving institutional conformity with externally imposed standards rather than fostering educational improvement; a mechanism for demonstrating compliance to external authorities rather than enhancing teaching and learning. This compliance fostered a particular institutional culture, one characterised by pressure to fulfil requirements without adequate time or independence to evaluate whether those requirements served their intended teaching purpose. For some participants, particularly expatriate academics whose job security depended on adherence to institutional mechanisms, the stakes of non-compliance could be high.

The impact of QA processes on participants' professional work revealed a disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities. Although participants were technically involved in QA processes, serving on committees, attending workshops, and completing surveys, they reported that their contributions had minimal influence on actual decision-making, particularly regarding teaching practices and academic policies. This superficial engagement operated to claim that academic voices were included in QA development and implementation, while their input was rarely considered or incorporated into policy outcomes. This tokenistic participation undermined trust in the system and reinforced perceptions that QA was imposed on academics rather than developed with them.

More importantly, the centralised QA system reconfigured the basis on which participants made professional decisions. Teaching choices that should have been grounded in pedagogical expertise, assessments of student needs, disciplinary knowledge, and evidence-based educational practices, were instead driven by what satisfied QA documentation requirements. The cumulative impact of these documentation demands was significant. Time and intellectual energy that could have been devoted to lesson planning, pedagogical innovation, reflective practice, or meaningful student engagement were likely absorbed by administrative compliance activities. This was not a matter of workload; it represented a change of direction of academic work away from its core educational purposes.

Participants perceived that the QA system had eroded their professional autonomy and capacity for independent judgment. Standardised QA requirements constrained their ability to make context-sensitive decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment approaches, decisions that traditionally fall within the domain of academic expertise. This distrust can be perceived as a process of de-professionalisation, a shift from being recognised as trusted experts capable of self-regulation to being positioned as employees requiring constant monitoring and external accountability.

Adding to participants' scepticism was the difficulty of establishing clear links between QA implementation and educational improvements. While they observed positive changes in areas such as academic integrity policies, assessment practices, and the use of technological approaches, participants remained uncertain about attribution. These developments occurred during a period of multiple concurrent changes: rapid technological adoption, emergency adaptations in response to COVID-19, and an institutional merger project that restructured the university. This overlap made it impossible to isolate QA's specific contribution from these other significant disruptions and innovations.

9.3 Contribution of the study

This study makes significant empirical, methodological, practical, and research contributions to the fields of QA in higher education, policy studies, and academic work.

Empirical contribution: Academics' voices in the Omani, GCC and MENA context

This study makes a significant contribution by addressing academics' perspectives on the QA system in Oman. While the global literature extensively documents academic experiences in Western contexts, the perspectives of the Omani academic community remain largely unexplored. This research provides an in-depth investigation of how academics in Oman perceive, experience, and navigate the QA system in their daily academic work. By examining how academics conceptualise, engage with, and respond to QA across multiple dimensions in terms of teaching, performance appraisal, and professional development, the study reveals the contested and often contradictory ways in which QA systems shape academic life.

Furthermore, the study explores QA's impacts on specific aspects of academic work: teaching practices, assessment methods, performance appraisal systems and professional development opportunities. This multi-dimensional analysis offers rich empirical insights into the often-contested relationship between academics and institutional QA practices, exposing tensions between compliance demands and professional autonomy, between standardisation and pedagogical effectiveness, between key performance indicators-driven accountability and educational improvement, and between professional development as surveillance versus useful growth opportunities.

Significantly, the study reveals how QA mechanisms designed to support academic development, such as performance appraisal practices, professional development programmes, and key performance indicators, are experienced by academics as monitoring and compliance mechanisms rather than tools for improvement. These findings challenge simple assumptions that QA implementation leads to quality improvement, revealing instead how a centralised system can unconsciously foster performative compliance rather than educational enhancement.

These empirical findings are further strengthened by their contextual situatedness. Research centring on academic perspectives in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains underrepresented in the international QA literature. By presenting contextually situated findings from this under-researched region, the study diversifies the QA literature by offering insights into how academics experience QA within centralised, government-driven systems, a governance model characteristic of GCC and MENA higher education. This includes how job insecurity among expatriate academics, a common feature across Gulf universities, intensifies compliance pressures and silences critique, adding a distinctive dimension to the empirical contribution that Western-centred studies have not captured.

Methodological contribution: Interpretive research insights

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of qualitative, interpretive research for understanding the impacts of QA systems on academic work. While Harvey (2024c) notes that the global QA literature is predominantly qualitative, in Oman, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches have dominated (Al-Maawali & Al Siyabi, 2020; Alshahri, 2014). This study's use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis reveals insights that surveys and statistical analyses could miss, particularly the subjective experiences, expressive responses, and meaning-making processes of academics navigating QA systems.

The methodological approach demonstrates how academic voices can reveal the gap between policy intentions and lived realities. For instance, while institutional reports might show high completion rates for professional development programmes and satisfactory performance appraisal scores, qualitative inquiry reveals that academics experience these as meaningless compliance exercises rather than developmental opportunities.

This interpretive methodology is particularly valuable in contexts where certain voices are marginalised or where power dynamics discourage open critique. By providing academics with an opportunity to voice concerns and needs that they would not otherwise be able to express in institutional settings, the study demonstrates how qualitative research can serve as a platform for marginalised voices and contribute to more democratic knowledge production on higher education policy.

Practical contribution: Evidence-based policy development

This study provides findings that enable policymakers at both the institutional and governmental levels to consider and develop more relevant and effective policies, institutional practices, and professional development initiatives tailored to the Omani academic community. Rather than relying on imported models or untested assumptions, decision-makers have empirical evidence on how QA should operate in practice and impact academic work. The implications of these findings for policy and practice are elaborated in the recommendation section below.

Contribution to future research: Foundation for longitudinal and comparative inquiry

This study establishes baseline data that enables several directions for future research. Longitudinally, experiences of QA change as policies develop, institutional cultures shift, and reform efforts emerge. By documenting academics' perceptions during a period of rapid transformation, including university mergers, pandemic adaptations, technological advancements, and increased QA implementation aimed at both national and international accreditation, this study provides a snapshot of current experiences. The study allows future researchers to assess whether the compliance culture, de-professionalisation dynamics, and superficial engagement forms identified represent transitional challenges or enduring structural features of centralised QA systems. Comparatively, the study provides an empirical case for cross-institutional and cross-national analysis. Researchers can examine whether similar tensions emerge in other Omani institutions, across GCC higher education systems, or in MENA contexts implementing centralised QA systems.

Moreover, the study establishes a foundation for investigating persistent questions that remain unresolved: How can QA systems move beyond tokenistic engagement to enable genuine academic voice? Under what conditions can QA shift from compliance-oriented performance to meaningful educational improvement? What governance structures might balance accountability demands with preservation of academic freedom and professional autonomy? How can higher education institutions (HEIs) resist the drift toward standardisation and conformity while maintaining QA? By establishing details on current realities, this study equips future researchers to pursue these vital research and practical questions.

9.4 Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study and building on existing research on QA in higher education, the following recommendations are offered to enhance academic staff engagement with and buy-in to QA processes, policies and practices. These recommendations also aim to address the interwoven tensions identified throughout the research and are tailored to key stakeholders at the national and institutional levels.

The most consequential finding of this study is the extent to which the current QA framework generated a compliance culture that was experienced by academic staff as hostile to professional autonomy and meaningful engagement with quality improvement. This is consistent with other research identifying accountability-oriented systems as potentially counterproductive to the teaching quality they are designed to enhance (Akalu, 2016; Hoecht, 2006; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). In my study, the compliance logic was reproduced at multiple levels of the university, from national policy to departmental practice, creating conditions in which performative conformity displaced quality reflection. Therefore, the reform cannot be addressed at any single level in isolation. It requires a reorientation of the underlying logic of the QA framework itself, at both policy and institutional levels, toward approaches that are trust-based, participatory, and attentive to the professional contexts in which teaching occurs.

It is recommended that the QA authority and university senior management take deliberate steps to protect and restore academic freedom and professional autonomy within the accountability framework. The findings of my study indicate that participants described the QA system in which its requirements limited their capacity to exercise pedagogical judgement, adapt their teaching to student need, and innovate within their disciplinary contexts. The implication for policy and institutional practice is that flexibility should be understood not as a concession to academic preference, but as a requirement of any QA system oriented toward quality improvement. This would mean building into the framework explicit protections for pedagogical discretion, ensuring that accountability mechanisms evaluate outcomes and processes rather than teaching practices, and creating space for academic staff within their disciplinary contexts to define quality in ways that are appropriate to their academic fields.

It is further recommended that the university senior management restructure academic participation in QA governance in ways that move beyond tokenistic consultation toward meaningful involvement in policy development. The findings of this study indicate that academics' involvement was largely superficial, with policy decisions made at senior management levels with limited input from those responsible for implementing them. Research suggests that meaningful academic involvement in the design and implementation of QA processes is associated with stronger process ownership and more effective quality improvement outcomes (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019; Cardoso et al., 2018). Therefore, the processes and policies and through which QA decisions are made need to be restructured to position frontline academic staff as expert stakeholders whose disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical experience are recognised as necessary inputs into any effective QA system. This would require, at minimum, the establishment of transparent feedback mechanisms and participatory governance structures that allow academic concerns to shape policy development rather than respond to it.

Finally, it is recommended that the university senior management should reduce the administrative burden associated with QA compliance. The findings of this study draw attention to the extent to which procedural demands consumed time and energy that participants identified as being at the direct expense of teaching preparation, curriculum development, and student engagement. This concern is well-documented in the literature across a range of national and global contexts (Alshahri, 2014; Cheng, 2009, 2011; Hariri, 2021; Newton, 2002a; Saeed, 2018) and the present study adds further contextual evidence to this literature. While administrative demands cannot be eliminated from any formal accountability system, the evidence suggests that the university senior management would benefit from implementing technological solutions, including AI-assisted documentation tools and automated reporting systems, that may reduce unnecessary administrative demands on academic staff. This can enable more focus on teaching quality and meaningful engagement with quality improvement processes.

While the recommendations outlined above operate at the level of policy and institutional level, their implementation will necessarily depend on a range of context-specific strategies within the university. Some examples of strategies are provided below to offer guidance on how the principles of trust, inclusivity, autonomy, participation, and transparency might be translated into practice.

- Move beyond tokenism by embedding participatory approaches into policy development and teaching quality review.
- Establish confidential and independent feedback mechanisms.
- Prioritise academic freedom, professional judgement, and disciplinary diversity.
- Create protected space for pedagogical experimentation.
- Reconfigure the performance appraisal system.
- Invest in substantial and sustained professional development, aligned with discipline-specific needs, through both internal and external opportunities.
- Ensure adequate resourcing of physical and technological infrastructure.

- Foster a culture of professional trust and psychological safety.

9.5 Limitations of the Study

This study, like other research, faces inevitable limitations. Recognising these is essential not only for maintaining transparency but also for accurately framing the conclusions of this thesis within its academic and contextual boundaries. First, the study was conducted at UTAS, a public university in Oman. As is consistent with case study methodology, the findings are contextually situated. Different universities, particularly those private HEIs that still hold international affiliations, may have different implementations of the QA system, institutional cultures, and levels of academic engagement, leading to different experiences and perceptions.

An important consideration shaping the data collection process was the potential hesitancy of participants to critique the university's QA system, particularly in the formal, recorded setting of virtual Zoom interviews. Despite assurances of confidentiality, discussing QA can be politically and professionally delicate. Research suggests that Zoom interviews, particularly when conducted with the camera on, can improve the depth and richness of participants' reflections when discussing sensitive topics (Gray et al., 2020; S. Lindsay, 2022). As discussed in Chapter 5, Zoom also provides a convenient and secure platform for managing privacy and confidentiality. However, face-to-face interviews generally allow for better rapport-building and may increase participants' comfort levels when discussing sensitive institutional issues. Awareness of being visually recorded may have created a sense of surveillance, causing some participants to self-monitor or withhold critical opinions, particularly on politically sensitive aspects of QA.

One final point worth noting can be better described as a contextual challenge rather than a limitation. However, it is important to highlight its potential impact on the research findings. The timing of this study may have influenced how participants perceived and discussed the QA system. Perceptions are never formed in isolation; they are shaped by institutional environments, evolving policies, and broader educational developments occurring during data collection. This study took place amid institutional reform, policy shifts, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which participants experienced heightened uncertainty, underlying anxiety and potentially unspoken resistance. During and after the pandemic, universities quickly implemented changes to teaching methods and assessment. Such disruptions significantly affected the educational system, institutional priorities, organisational culture, and the professions (Khuram & Shaukat, 2021).

9.6 What future research to consider

This study opens a number of paths for future research that could deepen the understanding of QA in Omani higher education. One key area involves examining the long-term impact of the Omani QA system on academic work. As the university is preparing for an upcoming accreditation process in 2028, future studies could investigate how the accreditation process influences teaching quality over time. Such research would help determine whether continuous improvement occurs throughout review cycles. Furthermore, conducting similar studies across other government and private HEIs in Oman would help determine whether the findings of this study reflect broader issues within the national QA framework or are more specific to the interpretation and implementation of QA policies within a particular university. Such comparative research could clarify whether the identified challenges arise from the design of the QA system itself or from institutional practices and decision-making.

A significant finding concerns the psychological and emotional impact of QA implementation on academic staff. Participants reported widespread anxiety, frustration, and stress arising from relentless documentation demands and constant surveillance. Future research should examine the long-term psychological effects of QA systems on academic well-being, including burnout, demoralisation, and stress-related outcomes, and explore the hidden costs of compliance-driven QA.

Closely related is the question of how QA systems reshape academic identity and professional self-understanding. Participants described feeling de-professionalised, transformed from trusted experts into monitored academics. Future research could investigate how academics construct and maintain professional identity under intensive QA surveillance, how they negotiate tensions between academic values and compliance demands, and what strategies preserve professional integrity amid performative pressures. Research employing a Foucauldian theoretical framework to examine how QA operates as a disciplinary power that reconstructs academic identity would particularly valuable.

Expanding the research to include other stakeholders within this research context, such as institutional decision-makers, heads of academic departments, and members of the QA Department, would provide a more comprehensive picture of how QA operates across different organisational levels. Understanding the perspectives of those who design, interpret and implement QA policies could reveal the reasoning behind particular approaches, uncover disconnects between policy development and ground-level implementation and identify institutional pressures that shape how QA is enacted.

9.7 Final thoughts

Completing this thesis during a period of significant institutional change within the university was both challenging and enlightening. Although the responses primarily concerned the implementation of the QA system, they offered various, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints. Engaging with hundreds of peer-reviewed publications enabled me to review the literature critically and emphasised the importance of academics as key stakeholders in this discussion. This allowed me to situate my study within a broad international discourse while remaining attentive to the specific context of the Omani higher education sector. More importantly, it helped me recognise the persistent gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the perspectives and voices of academics, which became a central concern of this research.

Alongside the written thesis, my participation in the Research Image Exhibitions (see Appendix 12) over three years provided a valuable space for reflection. These visual displays captured my growing relationship with the topic, passing through phases of confusion, doubt, and eventual clarity, and reinforced that research is never straightforward but a process marked by uncertainties and reflection. Initially, I expected gender and academic specialisation to influence how participants perceived the QA system. However, it became evident that these factors played a relatively minor role; QA was experienced mainly as an externally imposed framework that shapes academic work similarly across groups. I also recall moments when participants withheld their narratives until after the recording stopped or asked that specific insights remain unreported. Such experiences underscored the sensitivity of the topic and highlighted how issues of trust, confidentiality, and unspoken tensions complicate academic engagement with the QA system.

Looking back, I feel fortunate to have undertaken and completed this research. My professional background as Head of the QA Department, especially during and after the university merger project, provided invaluable context for interpreting the findings. This dual perspective, as both an insider practitioner and a researcher, presented its own challenges, requiring constant reflexivity to strike a balance between distance and lived experience. This thesis has deepened my understanding of QA in higher education and shaped my intellectual and professional growth. Completing this work has been both an academic contribution and a personal journey of development and engagement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Development of Oman's institutional standards

Oman's Institutional Standards have progressed significantly from 2004 to 2024, showing increased complexity and alignment with international best practices alongside national priorities. The 2004 standards laid the foundational framework, focusing on essential quality assurance areas such as governance, teaching, and student services, with an emphasis on compliance and self-assessment. The standards, developed around 2008 and refined and formally adopted in 2016, maintained the same overall structure and scope. This period was characterised by extensive stakeholder consultation and benchmarking against international norms, leading to enhancements in areas like student learning (coursework and research), research management, community engagement, and risk management. The framework also integrated national goals including Omanisation and cultural relevance. The 2024 standards represent a consolidation and modernisation effort, streamlining the number of standards to six broad categories closely aligned with Oman Vision 2040. These focus on innovation, external engagement, and quality enhancement beyond basic compliance, reflecting a shift towards fostering institutional excellence and visibility on both national and international levels.

Aspect	2004 Standards	2008 & 2016 Standards	2024 Standards
Context and development	Based on international good practices, adapted for Oman's context. Focus on planning, self-assessment, and quality improvement.	Benchmarked internationally with broad stakeholder consultation including ministries, experts, and HEIs. Emphasises cultural and national priorities.	Aligns with Oman Vision 2040 and national legislation. Reflects contemporary national priorities with emphasis on innovation and engagement.
Number of standards	10 Standards	9 Standards	6 Standards
Number of criteria	44 Criteria	54 Criteria	45 Criteria

The following pages in this appendix provide detailed descriptions of the standards and criteria for each of the versions compared above, offering a clear view of their scope and requirements.

1. Standards of Good Practice in Higher Education Institutions (OAC, 2004)

The 2004 Oman Quality Assurance standards provide a framework based on international good practices, adapted for the national context. They offer guidance for higher education institutions in planning, self-assessment, and quality improvement. Institutions are expected to select quality indicators and performance benchmarks that align with their specific missions and circumstances, aiming to achieve standards comparable to recognised international institutions. Certain performance indicators, such as graduate employment rates and faculty research involvement, are required across the system. The standards cover various institutional areas including facilities, resources, governance, and programme development. Student outcomes are evaluated through programme accreditation processes that align with the national Qualifications Framework, ensuring compliance with knowledge and skill requirements relevant to professional practice.

Standard	Criteria
1. Mission, Goals and Objectives	- 1.1 Appropriateness of the Mission - 1.2 Mission Statement Quality - 1.3 Development of the Mission Statement - 1.4 Use of the Mission Statement - 1.5 Goals - 1.6 Objectives
2. Governance and Administration	- 2.1 Governing Body - 2.2 Chief Executive Officer - 2.3 Internal Regulations - 2.4 Quality Assurance and Improvement - 2.5 Associated Companies

3. Learning and Teaching	- 3.1 Student Outcomes - 3.2 Support for Student Learning - 3.3 Quality of Teaching - 3.4 Programme Development and Review - 3.5 Partnership Arrangements - 3.6 Distance Education
4. Student Services	- 4.1 Planning and Evaluation of Student Services - 4.2 Administration of Services - 4.3 Student Residences - 4.4 Student Discipline - 4.5 Student Records - 4.6 Student Admissions
5. Learning Resources	- 5.1 Planning and Evaluation - 5.2 Organisation - 5.3 Support for Users
6. Facilities and Equipment	- 6.1 Policy and Planning - 6.2 Quality of Facilities - 6.3 Management & Administration - 6.4 Research Equipment - 6.5 Information Technology
7. Financial Planning and Management	- 7.1 Financial Planning and Budgeting - 7.2 Financial Management - 7.3 Auditing and Risk Assessment
8. Staffing and Employment	- 8.1 Staffing and Employment Policies - 8.2 Recruitment - 8.3 Personal & Career Development - 8.4 Discipline, Complaints and Dispute Resolution
9. Research	- 9.1 Institutional Policies - 9.2 Commercialisation of Research - 9.3 Facilities and Equipment
10. Community Relationships	- 10.1 Community Relationships - 10.2 Reputation in the Community

2. Institutional Standards and Criteria (OAC, 2008 & OAAA, 2016)

The 2016 Oman Quality Assurance standards were extensively benchmarked against international accreditation practices and tailored to fit the national and cultural context of Oman. The development process involved broad consultation with higher education institutions, government ministries, and external experts to ensure relevance and acceptance. A Consultative Committee representing all Omani HEIs and an international expert panel contributed to shaping the standards. Stakeholder dialogue included ministries such as Education, Manpower, Health, and Defence, with involvement from the Ministry of Higher Education. A national symposium in 2013 facilitated discussion of the standards and assessment approach, which was subsequently revised following pilot assessments in 2014.

Standard	Criteria
1. Governance and Management	1.1 Mission, Vision, and Values
	1.2 Governance Structure, System and Roles
	1.3 Management Structure, System and Roles
	1.4 Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance
	1.5 Strategic Planning
	1.6 Operational Planning
	1.7 Financial Management
	1.8 Risk Management
	1.9 Policy Management
	1.10 Entity and Activity Review Systems
	1.11 Student Grievance Procedures1.12 Health and Safety
	1.13 Oversight of Associated Entities (e.g. Owned Companies)
2. Student Learning by Coursework Programmes	2.1 Graduate Attributes and Student Learning Outcomes
	2.2 Curriculum
	2.3 Student Entry Standards
	2.4 Teaching Quality

	2.5 Research Components of Coursework Programmes
	2.6 Academic Integrity2.7 Student Placements
	2.8 Assessment Methods, Standards and Moderation
	2.9 Academic Security and Invigilation
	2.10 Student Retention and Progression
	2.11 Graduate Destinations and Employability
3. Student Learning by Research Programmes	3.1 Research Programme Design
	3.2 Research Student Entry Standards
	3.3 Supervisors
	3.4 Student Research Supervision
	3.5 Student Research Support
	3.6 Student Research Assessment
	3.7 Coursework Components of Research Programmes
	3.8 Academic Integrity, Ethics and Biosafety
	3.9 Retention, Graduate Destinations and Employability
4. Staff Research and Consultancy	4.1 Research Planning and Management
	4.2 Research Performance
	4.3 Research Funding Schemes
	4.4 Consultancy Activities
	4.5 Ethics and Biosafety
	4.6 Intellectual Property
	4.7 Professional Development for Research
	4.8 Research Commercialisation
	4.9 Research-Teaching Nexus
5. Industry and Community Engagement	5.1 Industry and Community Engagement Planning and Management
	5.2 Relationships with Industry and Employers
	5.3 Relationships with Professions
	5.4 Relationships with Other Education Providers
	5.5 Relationships with Alumni
	5.6 Relationships with the Community at Large
6. Academic Support Services	6.1 Academic Support Services Planning and Management

	6.2 Registry (Enrolment and Student Records)
	6.3 Library
	6.4 Information and Learning Technology Services
	6.5 Academic Advising
	6.6 Student Learning Support
	6.7 Teaching and Learning Resources
7. Students and Student Support Services	7.1 Students and Student Support Services Planning and Management
	7.2 Student Profile
	7.3 Student Satisfaction and Climate
	7.4 Student Behaviour
	7.5 Career and Employment Services
	7.6 Student Finances
	7.7 Accommodation, Catering and Transportation
	7.8 Medical and Counselling Facilities
	7.9 International Student Services
	7.10 Social and Recreational Services and Facilities
8. Staff and Staff Support Services	8.1 Human Resources Planning and Management
	8.2 Staff Profile
	8.3 Recruitment and Selection
	8.4 Staff Induction8.5 Professional Development
	8.6 Performance Planning and Review
	8.7 Promotion and Other Incentives
	8.8 Severance8
	.9 Staff Organisational Climate and Retention
	8.10 Omanisation
9. General Support Services and Facilities	9.1 General Support Services and Facilities Planning and Management
	9.2 Public Relations and Marketing
	9.3 Communication Services
	9.4 Facilities Management

3. Institutional Standards and Criteria (OAAAQA, 2024)

The current Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) evaluates six Institutional Standards along with 45 Criteria, all of which apply universally to higher education institutions. To achieve Accredited status, a higher education institution must satisfy all six Standards, which define the baseline requirements for acceptable performance. Institutions that exceed these expectations in certain areas may submit their exemplary practices for inclusion in the national higher education good practice repository. These standards and criteria are designed to align with the broader framework within which Institutional Accreditation functions, incorporating Oman's national objectives as detailed in Oman Vision 2040, along with specific mandates such as national health and safety laws, human rights considerations, labour market demands, entrepreneurship priorities, and the Higher Education Law.

Standard	Criteria
1. Governance & Management	1.1 Mission, Vision & Values
	1.2 Governance System
	1.3 Organisational & Management Structure
	1.4 Strategic & Operational Planning
	1.5 Risk Management
	1.6 Quality Management System
	1.7 Policy Management
	1.8 Physical Infrastructure & Facilities Management
2. Academic Provision & Resources	2.1 Graduate Attributes
	2.2 Student Admission & Orientation
	2.3 Registry & Student Records
	2.4 Teaching & Learning Framework
	2.5 Library & Learning Resources
	2.6 Information & Educational Tech Resources
	2.7 Academic Integrity & Security
	2.8 Academic Advising
	2.9 Academic Skills Enhancement
	2.10 Student Performance & Graduate Outcomes

3. Students & Student Support Services	3.1 Student Conduct & Behaviour
	3.2 Student Appeals & Grievances
	3.3 Student Finances & Grants
	3.4 Medical & Counselling Services
	3.5 Accommodation, Catering & Transportation
	3.6 Extracurricular Activities
	3.7 Career & Employment Services
	3.8 Student Satisfaction
4. Human Resources	4.1 HR Planning & Recruitment
	4.2 Staff Expertise, Sufficiency & Characteristics
	4.3 Staff Induction
	4.4 Academic Staff Workload
	4.5 Staff Performance Planning & Review
	4.6 Professional Development
	4.7 Staff Satisfaction & Retention
5. Research & Innovation	5.1 Research & Innovation Strategy & Performance
	5.2 Research Funding & Grants
	5.3 Research Ethics
	5.4 Consultancy Activities
	5.5 Intellectual Property
	5.6 Integration of Research & Teaching
6. External Engagement	6.1 Engagement with Industry
	6.2 Engagement with Professional Bodies
	6.3 Engagement with Education Providers
	6.4 Engagement with Alumni
	6.5 Engagement with the Wider Community
	6.6 Local & International Visibility

Appendix 2: Approval Letter from NCSI - Oman

المركز الوطني للإحصاء والمعلومات — NATIONAL CENTRE FOR STATISTICS & INFORMATION

تعزيز المعرفة — ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE

رقم القيد : 224217120

التاريخ: 26 / صفر /1444هـ

الموافق: 22 / سبتمبر /2022م

الفاضلة/ مريم بنت علي بن مسعود العوفي المحترمة

طالبة دكتوراه بجامعة وايكاتو بنيوزلاندا

تحية طيبة وبعد ..

الموضوع: سياسة وممارسات ضمان الجودة في تشكيل العمل الأكاديمي: وجهات نظر الأكاديميين

بالإشارة إلى طلبكم حول الموافقة على الموضوع أعلاه ، يسرنا إفادتكم بعدم ممانعة المركز من إجراء الدراسة، مع تأكيدنا عليكم بضرورة المحافظة على سرية البيانات الفردية للمشتركين وإستخدامها لأغراض الدراسة فقط وليس للنشر العام على أي مستوى آخر. كما نود التنويه بأن المركز لن يتحمل أية مسؤولية أو تبعات قانونية ناجمة عن قيامكم بهذه الدراسة.

وننوه أيضا إلى أن هذه الموافقة على جمع البيانات سارية حتى شهر فبراير 2023م، وفي حال رغبتكم في إعادة تنفيذ هذه الدراسة مستقبلاً أو أي دراسات أخرى تتطلب جمع بيانات من المجتمع يرجى التكرم بالتقدم بطلب جديد.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الإحترام والتقدير ..

يوسف بن عبدالله العجمي

مدير دائرة قياس الرأي العام

INFO@NCSI.GOV.OM
WWW.NCSI.GOV.OM

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR STATISTICS & INFORMATION
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المركز الوطني للإحصاء والمعلومات
ص.ب ٨٤٨ | مسقط ر.ب ١٣٣، سلطنة عمان
هاتف: ٢٤٢١٦٩٠٠ (٩٦٨+)
فاكس: ٢٤٢١٠٠٥٢ (٩٦٨+)

Appendix 3: Email for university management to access the participants

Subject Title: Request to Access the Participants for my Study

Dear Dr. (Name of Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Postgraduate Studies & Research)

I am Maryam Al Aufi, a PhD candidate studying at the Division of Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand as per the scholarship I received from the University of Waikato. I gained the initial permission letter from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) to complete my study in the area of Management and Educational Policies, in particular, quality assurance in higher education.

I have been a lecturer at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences – Shinas since 2015. In January 2019, I was appointed as the Head of the Quality Assurance Department at UTAS-Shinas until I decided to complete my PhD study. In the academic year 2020-2021, I participated in one of the committees related to the merging project for unifying the system of the UTAS as per the royal decree No. 76/2020 for the establishment of the UTAS combining the Colleges of Technology and the Colleges of Applied Sciences.

My study aims to explore academics' experiences of the implementation of quality assurance processes and practices at the university to gain insights into the perceived impacts of quality assurance in shaping academic work. For my study, I have selected four branches situated in relative geographical proximity to be the case of my study. I believe that the UTAS will be an appropriate institution for the case study as all branches have gone through the institutional accreditation Audit and now according to the merging project, the UTAS continues to improve the quality assurance system. I hope studying the UTAS as a case for my study will contribute to the development of the quality assurance system.

I have obtained ethical approval for this study from the Division of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato (Ref. No. FEDU047/22) and would like to commence data collection. Following the UTAS prescribed principles and procedures to gain access to the potential participants, I would like your official permission to access potential participants for my study in the four branches across three different academic departments. I have attached the Information Sheet for more information about my research.

For any queries or concerns, please contact me at ma439@students.waikato.ac.nc or +64 225100675. I will also be available for a meeting in person/online to answer any questions prior to their giving consent.

Respectfully,

Al Aufi, Maryam
PhD Candidate
Division of Education
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Appendix 4: Information sheet for participants

My name is Maryam Al Aufi, and I am conducting a research project as part of my PhD study at the Division of Education, University of Waikato. Ethical approval has already been obtained from the Division of Education Ethics Committee (Ref. No. FEDU047/22). The focus of my study is academics' perceptions of the manner in which the Oman quality assurance (QA) system impacts teaching in higher education. This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you'd like to take part or not. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

This Information Sheet sets out why I am conducting this study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what will happen after the study ends. Please go through this information and let me know if you have any questions/concerns before you make your decision to participate in the study.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form on the last page of this document. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form for your records.

RESEARCH TITLE

Quality Assurance Policy and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to explore academics' perceptions of the implementation of quality assurance processes and practices at the university to gain insights into the perceived impacts of quality assurance on teaching within the university.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will contribute to quality assurance policy, processes and practices by highlighting the impacts of QA on teaching. It will also explore the benefits, issues and challenges of implementing QA processes and practices from the perspective of academics. It will make recommendations for improving the implementation of quality assurance policy and practices in Omani higher education institutions. Thus, the results of this study will potentially contribute to improvements in the implementation of quality assurance policy and practices in Omani higher education institutions. Findings may also be used for future discussions on academics' perspectives in alleviating other quality assurance concerns.

WHY HAVE YOU RECEIVED THIS INVITATION?

You have been selected to participate in my study as you were involved in one or more of the following activities:

- Participating in institutional/department QA activities
- Writing/gathering data with regards to Institutional Standards Assessment Audit/ Piloting Qualification Listing Application

- Working as QA coordinators or QA committee members at the institutional/academic department level
- Being Course coordinators

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL FROM THIS STUDY

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations at the University. If you decide to participate, you may elect not to answer any questions asked during the interview. You may also withdraw data provided, and from the study itself at any time up until two weeks following the return of your interview transcript, simply by emailing me.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

If you agree to take part, I will interview you and ask you about your perceptions and personal experience regarding the implementation of quality assurance processes and practices. The interview will be conducted in English, either face to face or via Zoom, and will take approximately one hour. If you are an Arabic speaker, you have the option to speak in English or Arabic, whichever you prefer. With your explicit permission, the interview will be audio-recorded using the 'Voice Memo' app or video-recorded in case the interview is conducted via the ZOOM platform. The interview audio/video files will be transcribed using Google Docs and the interview transcripts will be uploaded into an NVivo software programme for thematic analysis.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will take every step possible to respect your privacy. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym of your choice. I will not name the university branch or the department in which you work and nor will I include demographic descriptors such as age, nationality, qualifications, and length of service. I will refer to your role in quality assurance and teaching activities in a generic manner. I will disguise specific event details that may enable identification and anonymise illustrative quotes used in the written report to remove any potentially identifying characteristics related to people, the university branch or the department. You will receive a copy of your interview transcript and have the right to amend or delete any data provided in it. Only the information shared in the interview that pertains to this study will be included in my findings.

All data and identifying materials such as consent forms, recordings and transcripts will be stored in a password-protected computer/Cloud storage and in a locked office cabinet accessible only by me, for a minimum of five years. No one other than my supervisors, me and you will have access to your raw data. While every effort will be made to protect your privacy, the nature of interview research means that anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Further, as my doctoral study will be accessible via the University of Waikato Research Commons, some of the data you provide will enter the public domain and may feature in subsequent publications and presentations. This makes the checking of your interview transcript a crucial safety strategy.

Potential Risks

I do not anticipate that you will experience any discomfort, inconvenience or risk in participating in this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any stage of your participation, please let me know so that I can provide you with any assistance you may need. You have the right to stop the interview at any time and may withdraw from this research study at any time up until two weeks following receipt of your interview transcript.

Complaint

If you have any concerns regarding the manner in which this research is being conducted, please contact me in the first instance. If I am unable to resolve these to your satisfaction, you are welcome to contact my Chief Supervisor: Prof. Don Klinger at don.klinger@waikato.ac.nz/ +64 78384281.

Contact and Questions

The researcher conducting this research is Maryam Al Aufi, a PhD candidate, under the supervision of Prof. Don Klinger (chief supervisor) and Dr. Michele Morrison (second supervisor), at the University of Waikato. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, you are encouraged to contact me through email: ma439@students.waikato.ac.nc or +64 225100675. I will also be available for a meeting in person/online to answer any questions prior to their giving consent.

Your participation is highly appreciated.

Respectfully,

Maryam Al Aufi
PhD Candidate
Division of Education
University of Waikato, New Zealand

[This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on August 5, 2022. Approval number: FEDU047/22.]

Appendix 5: Participant access letter from UTAS – Oman

رؤية عُمان 2040

جامعة التقنية والعلوم التطبيقية
University of Technology and Applied Sciences

رئاسة الجامعة
Head Office

No :
DATE :
DATE :

الرقم : ٦/١/٤٦٤/ ٢٠٢٢ ص.د
التاريخ : ٢١ - ٩ - ٢٠٢٢م
الموافق :

Respective Deans of Colleges of Technology at University of Technology and Applied Sciences,

After greetings,

Subject: Facilitating Researcher Application for Data Collection

Kindly be informed that we have no objection in allowing **Maryam Ali Masood Al Aufi** to pursue the field study for his research titled:
Quality Assurance Policies and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman.
The target group (research sample) includes academic staff at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences from September 2022 to March 2023 to fulfill the requirements of obtaining a PhD in Learning from University of Waikato, New Zealand. Furthermore, this application may be reviewed by the Research and Consultancy Committee as per the procedures, in order to provide the support required for data collection. For more details, please contact the researcher via email:
Maryam.alaufi@shct.edu.om
This application was issued upon the request of the researcher with no legal obligations on the university

Sincerely,

Dr. Aflah Zaher Al Shaqsi
Director of Academic Affairs

الافاضل/ عمداء الكليات التقنية بجامعة التقنية والعلوم التطبيقية المحترمين

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد،

الموضوع/ تسهيل مهمة باحث

يرجى التكرم بالعلم بأنه لا مانع لدينا من إجراء الباحثة/**مريم بنت علي بن مسعود العوفية** للدراسة كمتطلب للبحث بعنوان:

Quality Assurance Policies and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman.

حيث يستهدف البحث فئة ممثلة من الطاقم الأكاديمي بالكليات التقنية بجامعة التقنية والعلوم التطبيقية في الفترة ما بين سبتمبر ٢٠٢٢ إلى مارس ٢٠٢٣. وذلك استكمالا لمتطلبات نيل مؤهل الدكتوراة في التعلم من جامعة ويكاتو بنيوزيلندا.
آملين منكم التكرم بعرض الموضوع على المعنيين بالكلية (لجنة البحوث والإستشارات) حسب الضوابط والإجراءات المتبعة،والإيعاز بتقديم التسهيلات اللازمة التي تحتاج إليها الباحثة.
ولمزيد من التفاصيل يرجى التواصل مع الباحثة عبرالبريد الإلكتروني:
Maryam.alaufi@shct.edu.om
تم إصدار هذا الطلب بناء على طلب الباحث دون تحمل الجامعة أي تبعات قانونية تجاه الغير.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير،،،

د. أفلح بن زاهر الشقصي
مدير دائرة الشؤون الأكاديمية

جامعة التقنية والعلوم التطبيقية
رئاسة الجامعة
University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Appendix 6: Invitation email for the participants

Subject Title: Invitation to Take Part in my Study

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. (Name of Recipient and Title if Applicable)

This email is in regard to the attached permission letter I recently received from the university management to collect data for my PhD study. My name is Maryam Al Aufi and I am a PhD candidate at the Division of Education, University of Waikato, New Zealand. As part of my PhD thesis, I am conducting research into academics' experiences of quality assurance processes and practices at the University of Technology and Applied science. I am recruiting academic staff who have been involved in quality assurance processes and practices at the institutional/ department level.

I would like to invite you to take part in my research project as you meet the criteria set out in the attached information sheet. I would like to interview you to explore your thoughts on the implementation of the university quality assurance system and the manner in which this shapes your teaching. Please find attached an Information Sheet for more information about the study and data collection procedures.

Although I consider your participation and contribution to be very valuable to this research, please be assured that participation is completely voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate or for withdrawing from this study. Confidentiality of all participants will be maintained.

Would you be willing to be interviewed? If so, please reply to this email so we can agree on a suitable time and date to conduct the interview. Should you require any additional information or have any questions about the research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Maryam Al Aufi
PhD Candidate
Division of Education
University of Waikato, New Zealand
ma439@students.waikato.ac.nc
+64 225100675

Appendix 7: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for accepting the invitation to take part in my study. In this interview, I will ask you some questions based on your personal experience regarding the implementation of quality assurance processes and practices at the university.

Re-Confirm Informed Consent

I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions and/or to withdraw from the study at any time within two weeks of receiving your transcript. Before we start the interview, I want to reiterate that I am using an audio/video (whichever applies) recorder during the interview. Simultaneously, I will use my laptop to transcribe the interview using Google Docs if you are comfortable with this. I will make sure that all interview transcripts are de-identified and all data will be kept confidential. Your identity will be protected through the use of the pseudonym you mentioned in the consent form. At this time, please re-confirm your consent to participate in the interview, the use of the audio/video recorder, and the use of de-identified quotes in the written report for this study.

Procedures

The interview will last approximately one hour and will include a series of questions. Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, we can start.

1. My research is about quality assurance (QA) in the university. Please tell me about your involvement in and experience with quality assurance activities.
2. Based on your experience, and the work you have done, what does quality assurance in higher education mean to you?
3. You have the dual role of being an academic staff and someone involved with quality assurance. Can you provide examples of ways in which academics have influenced QA policy formation or implementation?
    - How are academic staff involved in developing quality assurance policies and practices in the university?
    - Do you feel your comments and suggestions about improving QA policy and practices are appreciated? In what ways?

- How does the university respond to academics' feedback on QA policies?

4. From your perspective as an academic staff member, how would you describe the QA implementation process at the university?
    - How well were QA policy and practices communicated to you?
    - What is the most valuable aspect of the QA implementation process?
    - Is there any specific aspect you found difficult regarding the QA implementation process?
5. One important aspect of QA is the focus on teaching. How have QA processes impacted teaching in your university?
    - What changes have QA processes brought with regard to:
        - Teaching methods and strategies
        - Feedback and assessment for learning
        - Professional Development
        - Performance Appraisal
6. Which of these changes have had the most impact on your teaching practice? In what ways?
7. Which aspects of QA policy and practices relating to teaching have proved challenging to implement?
    - What do you think is the reason for this?
    - What means/ways can you suggest for addressing challenges to improve quality assurance practices in teaching?
8. Overall, do you have any suggestions for changes or improvements in the implementation of the quality assurance system? If so, what would you like to see?
9. These are all my questions. Any additional thoughts you would like to share.

End of Interview

This concludes our interview. Over the next weeks, I will be finalising the transcripts of today's interview. I will send you a copy of the transcript to check if I accurately captured your responses. Also, at the end of the study, I would be happy to send you a summary of the key findings. Would you like to receive a summary? Thank you again for your time.

Appendix 8: Informed consent

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the research project: **Quality Assurance Policy and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman**. As part of that, your explicit agreement to be interviewed is required. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Once you have read the Participant Information Sheet, please sign this form to confirm that you approve the following:

- Any questions I have about the study have been answered to my satisfaction.
- All the information I provide will be securely stored in a password-protected computer/Cloud storage and in a locked office cabinet accessible only by the researcher (Maryam Al Aufi).
- The interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced. The transcript will be sent back to me for comment, correction, and approval.
- The transcript of the interview will be analysed and coded by the researcher (Maryam Al Aufi).
- Access to my interview transcript will be limited to the researcher (Maryam Al Aufi) and, where necessary, her supervisors.
- Participation in the study is voluntary. Withdrawal from the study can be made at any time within two weeks of receiving the interview transcript, without the need to justify my decision, simply by emailing the researcher (Maryam Al Aufi).
- To the best of her ability, the researcher will take every possible step to protect my privacy, including the use of pseudonyms and non-identifiable data.
- Only the information shared in the interview that pertains to this study will be included in the research findings.
- Specific event details that may enable identification and anonymize illustrative quotes used in the written report will be disguised.
- Any summary interview content or direct quotations from the interview may be published in any scholarly publication of academic papers, presented at conferences, or in aspects related to the study.

SIGNATURES

I, the undersigned, have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, and possible risks, and I have received a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and a copy of this consent. I agree to cooperate with the researcher, Maryam Al Aufi. I would like the researcher to refer to me by a pseudonym: ________________.

Participant's Print Name	Participant's Signature	Date of Signature

As the researcher of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, and the possible risks that are involved in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered to the individual's satisfaction.

Researcher Print Name	Signature of the researcher	Date of Signature

[This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on August 5, 2022. Approval number: FEDU047/22.]

Appendix 9: Email for participants for transcript checking

Subject Title: Request to Release your Interview Transcript

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. (Name of Recipient and Title if Applicable)

Many thanks for taking part in my study. As per the signed informed consent, please find the link below to the transcript of the interview conducted on (Day, Date).

The transcription is confidential, saved in my Google Drive account and accessed only by both of us. The interview was transcribed word for word except where I have removed any unnecessary repetitions. [For interviews conducted in Arabic, I have attached the translation in the same file of the transcript.] I would like you to read the transcription and review or amend any of your own contributions, that are coloured in blue, so that it accurately reflects your views. You can make comments on the transcription via the attached link, or you can mail me the transcription with your amendments (preferred to be in red).

After reviewing the transcription, please sign the transcript release form attached to this email. If you decided to withdraw, the final date for withdrawal will be ________________________.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require any further clarification by responding to this email ma439@students.waikato.ac.nz or at +64 225100675.

Thank you very much for your time and cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Maryam Al Aufi
PhD Candidate
Division of Education
University of Waikato, New Zealand
ma439@students.waikato.ac.nc
+64 225100675

Appendix 10: Transcript release form

Title of the Study: Quality Assurance Policy and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman

Interview Date: Day_______/ Date:________

Language of the Interview: [ ] English [ ] Arabic

I certify that I am the person whose name appears on this form and that I have received the following: [please put a tick (✓) next to the options that are relevant to you]

	Interview Transcript
	Interview Translation

I confirm that I have been provided with the opportunity to add, modify, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript and the translated file for interviews conducted in Arabic accurately reflect what I said in my personal interview with the researcher Maryam AL Aufi. I hereby authorise the release of this transcript to Maryam AL Aufi to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of the participant: **Signature**

[This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on August 5, 2022. Approval number: FEDU047/22.]

Appendix 11: Ethics approval from the University of Waikato

Te Wānanga Toi Tangata
Division of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton,
New Zealand, 3240

Division of Education Research
Ethics Committee (DEREC)
fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz
www.waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

5/8/2022

Dear Maryam Ali Masood Al Aufi

Division of Education Research Ethics Committee Application Approved FEDU047/22

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled "Quality Assurance Policy and Practices in Shaping Academic Work: Perspectives of Academics in the Context of Oman" was approved by Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee on August 5th, 2022.

Please be aware that the Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards

PJ Frawley

Chair
Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee (DEREC)

Appendix 12: Record of participation in research image exhibitions

The following entries showcase my participation in three Research Image Exhibitions held at the University of Waikato. These exhibitions celebrate the *depth and breadth* of educational research created by academic staff and PhD students from the Division of Education. Each participant was invited to submit one original image, a title, and a 150-word description that captured an aspect of their research. Submissions included photographs, drawings, multimedia illustrations, and digital artworks.

Event Date: 28 April 2023

Reality shapes our perceptions!

Note. This word cloud is designed and created by me using Microsoft PowerPoint.

This word cloud, consisting of over 100 views, is based on initial findings of 16 interviews conducted with academic staff in one of the public universities in the Sultanate of Oman. Perceptions are likely to be complex and multifaceted, reflecting a range of perspectives and experiences.

As a person in the academic field, do you perceive the term in the image above as others perceive it, or do you find it as something else?

Event Date: 19 April 2024

Beyond the walls: Academics' perspectives through the quality assurance maze

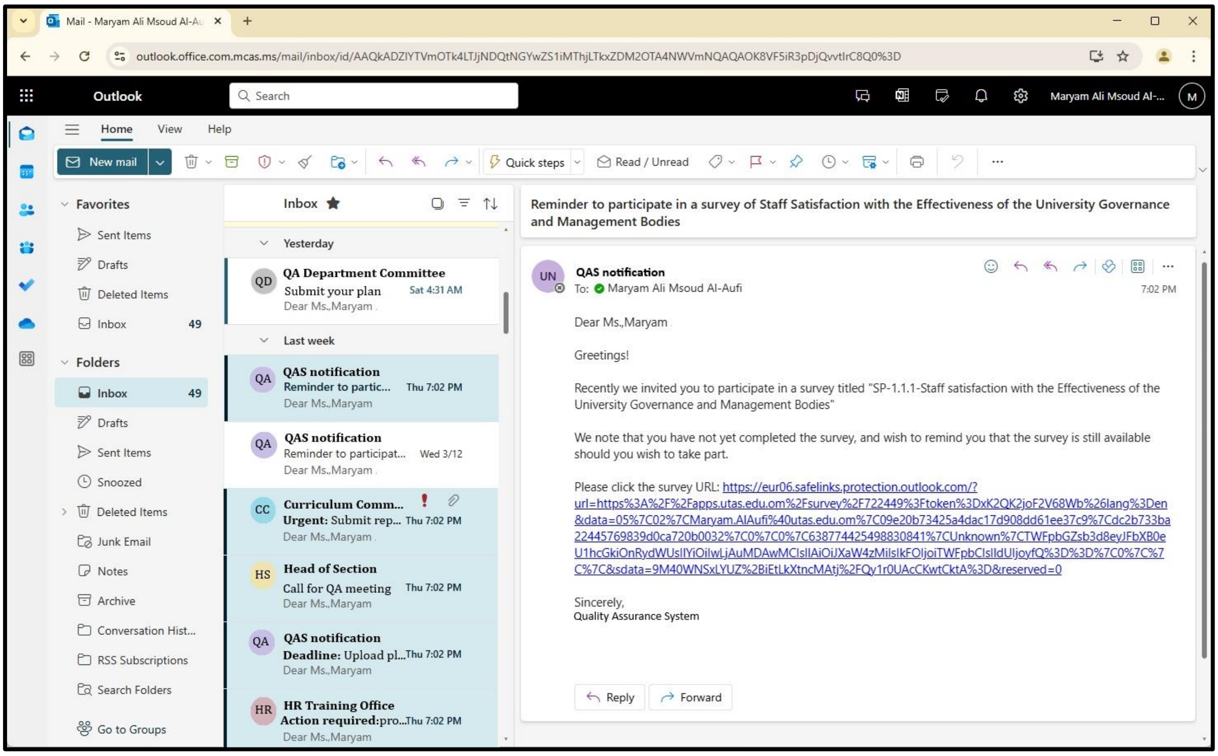
Note. An AI image generated by DALL·E

For academic staff in higher education, quality assurance resembles navigating a maze with high walls, where complexity mirrors perplexing pathways, leaving academic staff uncertain. This analogy presents the multifaceted experience academics encounter, reflecting the complexities inherent in quality assurance processes and practices in higher education. Beyond the walls, my research explores the intersection between quality assurance processes and teaching practices, exploring how frameworks and standards influence teaching practices, assessment, professional development and performance. Moreover, it examines the concrete impacts and significant challenges perceived by academic staff in implementing QA policies and practices. Just as navigating a maze, academic staff face complex barriers in implementing quality assurance processes.

Event Date: 12 May 2025

The burden of QA: Compliance over quality?

An overflowing inbox, filled with reminders to submit reports, attend meetings, and complete surveys, defines the daily reality of academic staff in the context of Oman. The quality assurance (QA) system in higher education has become a bureaucratic burden, enforcing compliance rather than fostering improvement. QA now demands compliance at every turn, pulling academics away from teaching, research, and professional growth. Instead of ensuring quality, it imposes control, reducing academic work to administrative tasks. As you view this screenshot, consider how these constant demands weigh on academic staff and whether QA is truly fulfilling its original purpose in higher education.



Note. This screenshot was slightly modified for privacy reasons while keeping the original content largely similar.