CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1: The Contextual Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Since the decades of 1950's until today, there has been a widespread of the concept of democracy in higher education in many countries around the world. This concept has triggered mass participation and enrolment in higher education, and also mass involvement of the private sector in the establishment of colleges and universities. Higher education in many countries has become a new domain for good business, and thus higher education has lost its elitism and selectiveness (Clark, 1996; Sufean, 1996; Sufean & Aziah, 2008).

Democracy in higher education has its landmark significance: it has promoted a growing social demand for higher education, and this is, in part, due to the belief that degrees and diplomas from higher education institutions are the passage to better jobs and future for the graduates. Societies and families in many countries have invested in the education of youth in colleges and universities. In many developed and developing countries, there emerge tens or hundreds of new colleges and universities, public and private ones, to cater to the high social demand for higher education. It is in the midst of this trend that governments of many countries have launched the quality assurance policy to

ensure that study programs, degrees, and diplomas offered by the new colleges and universities adhere to a certain acceptable standard. The long-standing, established colleges and universities are indirectly affected by this policy; they are forced to adhere also to new bureaucratic regulations amidst the vehement arguments for academic freedom and autonomy. Quality surveys, performance assessments, ranking surveys, and standard procedures of quality are considered a hindrance to independence, innovation, creativity, and intellectualism of academics and students; they are just bureaucratic impediments (Sufean, 2008).

In the context of expansion and democracy of higher education, the traditional, informal academic self-regulation, which for centuries was held to be sufficient in guaranteeing quality, has been clouded by explicit quality assurance mechanisms and related reporting and external accountability procedures. There is a wide variety of Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA) worldwide. There is currently, however, little uniformity or harmonization of quality assurance agencies and their procedures. Indeed many countries, regions and cultures are developing their own approaches to academic quality assurance. Some agencies are state-driven; others are private, with many intermediate forms. Some are embedded in the higher education sector, but many are imposed on the higher education sector by states, professions or other bodies. Some agencies are working as real accreditors of programs or institutions, others organize merely quality assurance procedures with no clear standards, benchmarking or final statement. Although there is some convergence towards a global quality model, there still is a great divergence in methodologies, protocols, assessment techniques and outcomes. The consequences of evaluation can be manifold and

therefore all the functions of quality assurance and accreditation differ to a high degree.

In the 1980's, quality assurance began to be introduced and implemented in distinctive ways in the U.S.A.'s higher education institutions. At the state level, state boards and legislatures began to emphasize and associate QA with assessment and accountability. At the institutional level, quality review processes began to take on new meanings and to be exercised through different mechanisms and processes in the context of strategic management efforts in order to refocus institutions (Rhoades& Barbara, 2002).

In the United States of America (U.S.A.), the idea of quality assurance of higher education institutions and accreditation dates back to the formation of accrediting bodies. The oldest of six regional accrediting associations were established in the late nineteenth century:- the New England Association of Schools and Colleges; the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools; the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools; the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges; the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools; and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. All six of them are voluntary, non governmental, non profit bodies. Although these associations are non-governmental, their decisions regarding the accreditation of institutions affects eligibility for federal funding (including student financial aid). The associations cover education from the kindergarten level to the higher education level, and are devoted to quality assurance and improvement. The regional associations oversee the accreditation of institutions. However, there are dozens of other specialized

and professional accrediting associations that accredit programs in particular fields, e.g., Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. The certification in the professional fields is also a function of state licensing bodies. Thus, quality assurance in the U.S.A. began as a self regulatory activity organized by non- governmental associations (Rhoades& Barbara, 2002)

In response to the polemic of quality assurance in the United Kingdom, there has been a considerable growth of quality-management processes both internally, normally through 'quality' or 'standards' office within institutions, and externally through first, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC,1993-1997), and then the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE). The external processes have included departmental subject review, institutional audit, benchmarking, program specification and performance indicators (Armstrong, 2000).

External quality assurance in the United Kingdom's higher education, other than that undertaken by professional or regulatory bodies, is currently conducted through two processes carried out by the QAA: 'subject review' process and 'institutional audit' process. Subject review involves academic peers reviewing six aspects of provision: curriculum design, teaching learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, learning support, learning resources and quality management and enhancement. The process normally involves a four-day visit during which teaching is observed, student work is examined and documentation, of both the subject area and institutional quality

assurance practices, is reviewed. The result is a numerical score for each aspect of provision on a four point scale. A report of the outcomes of each institutional subject review is published and made available for public scrutiny.

From the mid-1980's onward, quality assurance discussions emerged in other European countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Norway. Given this pattern in Europe, it is perhaps appropriate that quality assurance emerged as a topic in the 1987 meetings of the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR), which were held in Twente, Netherlands (Kells and Van Vught, 1988). The conference program included many presentations on institutions' self- assessment and self-regulation. By 1989, quality was one of the core themes of the annual EAIR meeting around which the conference schedule was organized. It was to remain so throughout the 1990's. Moreover, quality and strategic assessment came to be featured for the EAIR other conferences: 1992 on contextual planning; 1994 on quality as a university culture; 1997 on innovative universities; 1998 on learning and innovation in organizations; and 1999 on renewed institutions (Rhoades& Barbara, 2002).

1.2: Perspectives of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Literature is abundant on the issues of quality, total quality, and accreditation, so much so that there appears to be a confusion and incongruence about what the terms are about. It is well known that the concept of quality is not easy to define (Green, 1994; Van Vught, 1992). So far, there is no common agreement on the definition of quality in higher education. The diversity of definition is made

complicated due to the fact that higher education has profoundly changed in the past few decades. Higher education institutions and higher education systems have faced pressures of increasing numbers of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, implications and impact of new technologies (Altbach et. al. 1999). In recent years, the changing contexts present emergent needs to revisit the concept of quality. Discussion around what constitutes quality in higher education continues to be the focus of introductory comments in the literature and with good reasons. Academics are concerned with the changing landscape and meanings of quality in many aspects of university development, particularly in curriculum and knowledge production and application (Watty, 2003).

Currently, there are thousands of believers and hundreds of ardent proponents or gurus of quality assurance and benchmarking processes worldwide. Basically, they profess the same system thinking and promote the same process framework, and only differ in some small ways. Their strong point is that quality assurance and benchmarking are essential for making world class colleges and universities; hence, quality assurance and benchmarking should be enforced by governments upon the colleges and universities. Or, at the very least with a pinch of academic autonomy, benchmarking has been argued as the most sensible choice for universities to be the best in class at the global level (McKinnon, Davis & Walker, 2000). With this underlying rationale, many developing countries in Asia and some states in the USA are embarking on the quality assurance policy for their higher education sector, while some developed countries such as

Australia, Canada, UK, and Germany are embarking on good practices benchmarks policy for their universities (Wan Jaafar, Mokhtar & Nooreha, 2000).

With regards to higher education, quality embraces all functions and activities, such as, quality of teaching, training and research; quality of learning (quality of students); or quality of governance and management, to mention just a few (Craft 1994). Quality relates to institutional mission. An institution is said to be of quality if it achieves its mission and meets the expectations of stakeholders. This involves a judgment both on the pertinence of the mission and on whether it is fulfilled or not. Apart from that, the concept stresses largely on the quality of the educative product as measured by the acquired knowledge of the graduates, their ease in finding work, or their social performance.

Harvey and Green (1993) state quality is a relative matter related to the extent and processes directed at achieving the desired outcomes. They further define quality metaphorically as follows:

- Quality as 'exceptional' (excellence).

- Quality as ' perfection or consistency' (zero defects).

- Quality as 'fitness for purpose' (mission orientation and consumer orientation).

- Quality as 'value for money'.

- Quality as 'transformation'.

Figure 1.1 next page shows that the concept of quality has shifted from a general level to various dimensions (categories) of quality at the second level.

When considering quality in higher education it is valid to remove the second dimension of quality detailed in the diagram which refers to perfection or consistency. Most would agree that higher education does not aim to produce standardized graduates, free of defects. What remains is a quality matrix that may form the basis of an analytical framework to consider quality in higher education (Lomas 2002). Of interest is how different stakeholder groups conceive quality because the reluctance of academics to engage with quality assurance system, whether internal or external, may be due to conflict in conceptions of quality between, and potentially within stakeholder groups.
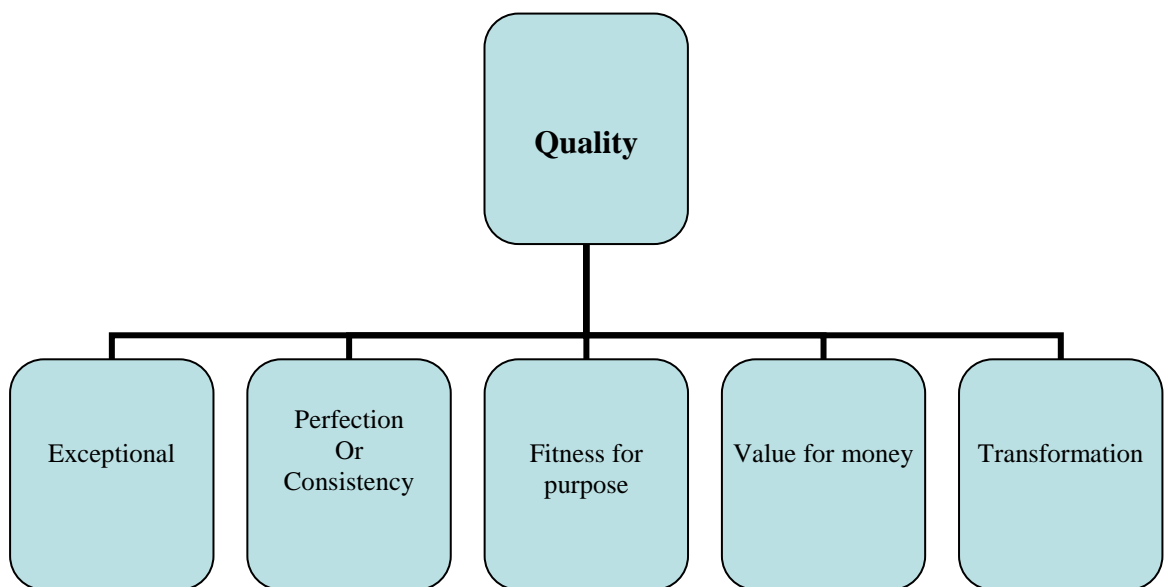

Figure 1.1: Dimensions of Quality

[Source: Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 12]

Quality assurance in higher education can be grouped into five possible operational definitions (Harvey and Knight, 1996) as follows:

1. Quality in higher education can be viewed, first, as "exceptional", with three notions in terms of "being distinctive", as exceeding very high standards and as passing a set of required standards, with each of which subjected to debate.

2. The second view to quality assurance in higher education is in terms of "consistency", especially of the processes involved through specifications to be achieved through the zero-defects approach and the quality culture. But this is problematic and it can be argued with regard to whether there is a consistent conformity to standards in higher education (Harvey and Knight, 1996), especially given the fact that such standards of conformance are needed to be achieved by the students.

3. The third view of quality assurance is in relation to the "purpose of the product/ service" (Crawford, 1991), which again, raises three issues: fitting to the customer specification, mission-based fitness for purpose, and customer satisfaction", each of them can be subjected to debates regarding its purpose, meaning, and process.

4. The fourth view of quality is in terms of "value for money through efficiency and effectiveness" (Schrock and Lefever, 1988), which is clearly linked to notion of accountability and the emphasis on performance indicators. But, here again, this very emphasis on performance indicators is debatable.

5. The final perspective of quality assurance is its "transformative" character, which can refer to a qualitative change of form or process, which can include individuals' cognitive development due to the fact that

education is an ongoing process of transformation of the mind, apart from empowerment and enhancement of the customers.

Frazer (1994) stresses that the focus of quality should be 'what students have learnt- what they know, what they can do and what their attitudes are- as a result of their interactions with their teachers, departments and higher education institutions…quality must be about scholarship and learning'.

Lagerweij and Voogt (1990) lay emphasis on the dynamism and conclude that while the concept of quality in education cannot be easily defined in a clear and exact manner, any definition of quality should be expected to change over time, because "it necessarily reflects a society's interpretation of educational needs and the intensity of its moral and financial commitment to fulfilling them".

In retrospect, quality assurance is defined as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standard of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced (CHEA, 2004). Usually quality assurance includes expectations that mechanisms of quality control are in place and effective. In some contexts, such as the U.K., quality control is in the form of standards set by the institution or other bodies that oversee the awarding of degrees. It is important to distinguish between quality assurance, accreditation, validation, quality audit and subject benchmark statements.

Ellis (1993) states that essentially, quality assurance is about specifying standards and meeting the standards of products and services produced. The concept has been adopted rapidly and pervasively, not only in business sector, but also in education. 'Standards' as a term is subjective because its conception and measurement depends on the observer. Quality assurance implies both standards and excellence. The quality of university teaching is measured by its ability to consistently satisfy students' needs and expectations in terms of their education and employment.

Quality assurance is the initial stage of the pursuit for quality—the advanced stage is external benchmarking of best practices. Quality assurance pertains to the process of achieving the minimum quality standards set by the government or accrediting bodies that need to be achieved by providers (colleges or universities) in order for them to be recognized as higher education institutions having public accountability and national (or international) credibility (Sufean, 2008). The institutions that do not reach the minimum standards are given assistance and advice for them to improve, or they have the option to close down operation. The key points here are minimum quality standards and public accountability. The quality assurance policy in many countries has the salient purpose of pinning down bogus providers and driving poor quality colleges to closure. This is to protect the public from being cheated by bogus business operators who are out to short-change potential students with irrelevant and useless study programs. Quality assurance usually involves professional associations to assess and verify the quality of study programs and degrees of an institution.

Based on her study, El Khawas (1998) states that governments of many developed and developing countries are concerned with the issues of quality assurance and quality improvement in higher education. Traditional academic controls are inadequate to deal with new developments and challenges, and hence quality assurance is needed.

El Khawas further states that in many countries, two new trends have given rise to the need of QA:

i.   Mass higher education: liberal and wider access to higher ed –leads to expansion of enrolment— opening of new private and public colleges—diversity of institutions in terms of size, programs, curriculum contents, graduation requirements, employability standards.

ii.   Traditional informal procedures of enforcing quality are not suitable anymore. Many governments are now enforcing a formal and systematic quality assurance. Governments have established their accrediting body for this purpose. Academics have conceded to necessity of QA as the means to quality of academic and training programs in public and private institutions, especially the new ones.

Based on her analysis of many policy debates on QA in higher education in many countries, El Khawas identified six core elements of QA:

i.   Semi-autonomous accrediting agency

ii. Explicit standards and expectations

iii. Self-study by academic institutions or units

iv. External review by visiting experts

v. Written recommendations

vi. Public reporting

vii. Attention to both process and results

Literature review in the area suggests also that quality assurance has been the central concept and attention of governments and institutions in the field of higher education in the 1990's. With varying intensity, pace, thoroughness and success, most countries in the world have established systems and procedures of quality assurance in higher education, comparable to the same movement in business, industry, and government pervading in the decade of 1980's. At the end of the 1990's, quality assurance has been somewhat institutionalized in higher education due to the insistence of government policy-makers who wanted to seek the goals of public accountability, excellent reputation, and relevancy of higher education in relation to graduate employability and international standing.

Recent developments have brought the questions of quality and relevance of higher education to the fore in education system in the world. The scarcity of funding has made governments to look more closely at what higher education institutions deliver in terms of number of graduates, the contents of their education and the level achieved as compared to other countries (Enache, 1992). There has been, particularly in the last decade or so, increasing concern on the part of governments around the world to ensure that higher education in their

countries is worthy of respect. To this end, national approaches to extra-institutional scrutiny have been established, which have taken forms that reflect different national styles. For example, the USA has, for a long time, relied on private accreditation agencies which operate a voluntary system for institutions and programs to become accredited: the general acceptance of this approach has given the agencies of a quasi- public role. In contrast, some other countries operate a system of peer review which is under the control of the higher education institutions themselves (CHEA, 2002). National approaches to quality assurance are additional to whatever accreditation arrangements operated by professional associations.

In the Sultanate of Oman, there is a strong social demand for higher education, but with the fact that government higher education institutions can only accommodate around 15,000 places to qualified students annually (Ministry of Higher Education 2005), there still arises an urgent need to establish private higher education institutions to cater for the rising number of students going to higher education. Even though the involvement of the private sector is encouraged, the increased number of private higher education institutions could be at the expense of quality, and thus there exists a fear among the public about the production of substandard graduates who would be unable to contribute to national development and unable compete and cope with the global labor market.

Amidst this fear and concern, the public in Oman feel that there is a strong need for quality assurance of study programs and the graduates produced. A new system of quality assurance in higher education institutions in the Sultanate of

Oman begins with the institutionalization for quality assurance mechanism in all higher education institutions. Now that the structure of the system of higher education has been established, with more than fifty institutions offering programs to approximately forty thousand students, the Sultanate is appropriately turning its attention to the quality of that system, in the context of the challenges of globalization with its rapidly accelerating knowledge economy based on information technologies (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005). Also, as graduates of educational programs become more mobile in the global society, there is a need to establish the comparability of higher education degrees internationally through quality assurance systems becomes more pressing (Tammaro 2005).

The private higher education institutions play a very important role in complementing the government institutions which cannot cope with increasing number of students wanting to pursue tertiary education. This initiative has given way to the private sector to contribute in the process of educational development and reduce the pressures pressing on Governmental higher education institutions. Decrees and Acts were issued that regulate the involvement process of private higher education. The Royal Decree No. 42/99, regarding the establishment of private higher education institutions in Oman states:

> It is allowed by the Act of the Ministry of Higher education, after the approval of Higher Education Council, to establish private higher education institute, that carry out teaching one or more of the scientific and technical specialty after general secondary school stage in accord with the developments plans in the Sultanate and its market.

As such, it is very crucial for the Oman government to safeguard the quality of educational programs and degrees offered by the private higher education institutions. There is a need for higher education institutions to be accredited and recognized in order to protect the interests of students, parents, stakeholders, employers and society at large. Hence, in 2002, the Government has established a monitoring body called the Accreditation Board for the purpose of accrediting higher education institutions to offer programs at specified levels, and similarly accredits individual programs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2004).

1.3: Uses and Purposes of QA

In the USA, Gary (2002) and Colbex et. al. (2005) find that there are several trends and purposes of higher education accreditation, which are as follows:

i.   Self review of institutional processes—to be cost effective

ii.   Educational effectiveness by measurable outcomes, not on qualitative standards of inputs—e.g student learning outcomes, program goal attainment—outcomes-based accreditation

iii.   Organizational improvement based on outcomes-based assessment—evidence for continuous improvement

iv.   Accreditation reviews as catalysts for transformation—accreditation bodies assist institutions in making constructive change—strategic redirection

v.   Multiple visitation of accreditors—report made public—to gain public confidence

Quality assurance has different users and specific uses. The primary users of quality assurance include government, students, employers and funding organizations, each of which use the process and outcomes for their own purposes (Marie, 2003). Based on literature on quality assurance, Table 1.1 summarizes the uses of QA in various settings.

Table 1.1: Uses and Users of QA

USERS	USES
Government	To define higher education country- wide To assure quality higher education for the.
Citizenry	To assure quality labour force To determine which institutions and programs.
Public agencies / fund providers	To accept into civil service only those graduated from accredited institutions To determine which institutions receive research grants To generally use quality assurance as a means of consumer protection.
Students	To assist in selecting an institution for study. To ensure transfer between accredited institutions To ensure admission at the graduate level in different institution from undergraduate degree To assist in employment, particularly in civil service and in the professions
Employers	To assure qualified employees
Funding Organizations	To determine eligible institutions
Institutions of Higher Education Organizations	To improve institutional information and data To enhance institutional planning To determine membership in certain To facilitate transfer schemes To assure a qualified student body

(Source: Summarised from Jung, 2005)

Oman's Ministry of Higher Education aspires to see the successful implementation of quality assurance policy and to see that colleges and

universities in Oman are of international standard. Quality assurance will serve as the means of betterment for both the country and higher education community. The aspiration is based on the important benefits of quality assurance as suggested by Brown (2004) as follows:

- Defines higher education: the foundation of quality assurance consists of standards or criteria for quality that are agreed upon by the communities of interest (e.g. government, higher education institutions, the professions, employers).

- Assists in reform efforts: the standards for quality can help define expectations for higher education institutions and their programs i.e. what they are expected to become.

- Provides a basis for future planning: with the standards as anchors for definition, the institution is clearer about its present in order to plan better for its future.

- Provides a structure for educational improvement: quality assurance is not only for the purpose of assessing, but also for the purpose of enhancing the level of educational quality.

- Maximizes communication across education: a national set of standards and a process for applying them enhances a country's ability to establish comparative data across its system of higher education, and a student's ability to move from secondary to tertiary and within tertiary education.

- Assists users to make better decisions.

1.4: Related Theories, Conceptual Framework, and Theoretical Model of the Study

The conceptual framework of this study accentuated on the concept of quality of higher education institutions and the commonly adopted process of QA in some countries such as in the USA, United Kingdom, and Malaysia. However, conceptual framework alone is not enough; it must have a theoretical grounding.

The critical question is: What is the underlying theoretical basis for the QA movement throughout the world? The general theory that pertains to this study is the human capital theory which posits that education is a form of investment for human capital development. The positive impact that education has on economic growth has been demonstrated by many scholars. For example, Schultz (1961) showed that between 30 to 50 per cent of that part of American output growth between 1929 and 1956 not explained by conventional factor inputs were due to the increase in the quality of labor through education. The same conclusion could be said for developing countries. In most instances, the social and private rates of return obtained from investing in primary, secondary and tertiary education in a number of developing countries exceeded the corresponding rates of return on alternative forms of investment (Psacharopoulos, 1985). It can be argued here retrospectively that the quality of the labor force depends on the quality of graduates from various educational institutions, and consecutively the quality of graduates depends on, in turn, the quality of educational programs and institutions. Low quality graduates come from low quality institutions and programs, and vice-versa (Lim, 2001). University graduates are a critical

professional human resource for national development, especially in developing countries.

Another general theory related to this study is the accountability theory which states that the government is accountable for assuring that educational programs provided by public and private higher education institutions must be of acceptable quality or standard so that the graduates produced by colleges and universities have attained a certain degree of professionalism and are highly employable in the job market, whether at the local level or international level. High quality graduates reflect the high standing of the institutions that produced and trained them (Green, 1994; Mayhew et. al.; 1990, Van Vught et. al., 1994).

Furthermore, the third theory is the TQM (total quality management) theory. According to Harris (1994), there are three generic approaches to total quality management (TQM). First, a customer focus approach, where the idea of service to students is fostered through staff training and development; second, a staff focus approach, that is concerned to value and enhance the contribution of all the members of staff to the effectiveness of the school; and the third, that takes a service agreement focus and seeks to ensure conformity to specification at certain key measurable points of the educational process. TQM combines quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement (Hoyl, 1994) and goes beyond traditional customer satisfaction by addressing the needs of internal customers, suppliers, and others stakeholders (Peach, 1994).

The fourth theory is the quality assurance theory which states that quality assurance is a management system aimed at instituting the highest standard and systematic work processes in organizations, producing the highest standard of products and services, and attaining the highest degree of customer satisfaction. The achievement of the highest standard in those facets is critical for the sustainability and expansion of corporations in the competitive global arena and boosting the reputation and status of corporations in relation to others (Brown, 2004; Marie, 2003).

In addition, at the system level, the implementation of QA policy in Oman can be considered as a new wave of educational reform and change. In this regard, two other related theories are Fullan's change theory and Senge's learning organization theory. Fullan's (1993, 2001a) change theory postulates that change is necessary for organizational improvement and sustainability and it is accompanied with uncertainties and chaos, thereby this necessitates systematic, planned strategic actions to make the change viable and achievable. Thus, the implementation of QA policy in Oman will trigger an impetus in the higher education landscape which needs a systematic, planned framework of actions.

Senge (1990) posits that the organizations which truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization. A learning organization is one that continually expands its capacity to create its future. Adaptive learning is necessary for sustainability, and generative learning enhances the capacity to create.

Furthermore, Senge explicates that the innovative learning organizations have five interrelated components, each mutually support the others, in contributing to the success of organizations.

- Systems thinking—an organization is a system which consists of many interrelated components, which even though function separately, they are dependent on each other and working harmoniously with each other to achieve balance of the entire system

- Personal Mastery—it is the capacity to continually clarifying and deepening personal vision, focusing energies, developing patience, and seeing reality objectively.

- Mental Models—the images, assumptions, generalizations, and value system that shape one's understanding of the world and one's behavior and attitude

- Building Shared Vision—a common goal worthy of pursuit by all people in an organization

- Team Learning—individuals engage in a dialogue, think, analyze, and solve problems together as a team; in the process individuals learn from each other and share the important ways towards success.

Theories provide the background of interpretation of the process and activities related to a phenomenon, issue, or concept. For the quality issue, there exist several models of management, but the current worldwide trend is the total quality management model emphasizing on quality assurance operating system

and total accreditation system. With these two management systems, a university may hope to achieve its high ended outputs such as worldwide reputation for its degrees, accreditation by professional bodies, high quality graduates, highly employable graduates, high customer satisfaction, and high sustainability. Whatever it is, there must be a systematic way of managing QA.

In the USA, the Workforce Board Development (2000) urges career development centers in the USA to adopt the Malcom Baldrige Quality Award assessment system as the means for implementing quality assurance. The Board defines quality assurance as the strategies, plans, and decisions to guarantee continued characteristics of excellence and superiority in products and services provided by organizations. The Board believes that quality assurance is an important tool for ensuring quality workforce produced by career training providers, and it is an effective way for ensuring customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. The Board introduces the concept of supplier certification, that is, a supplier of a product or service is given a certificate by an authority to acknowledge that the supplier has reached certain quality standards which are consequently maintained uniformly and continuously. In accordance with the Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria, there are seven areas of a supplier's quality assurance process to be assessed:

    i.   Leadership

    ii.   Information Analysis

    iii.   Strategic Quality Planning

    iv.   Human Resource Development

    v.   Process Management

vi.   Business Results (Quality and Operational Outcomes)

vii.   Customer and Market Focus

The assessment of the areas is done intensively to enable a supplier to harness its strengths and to overcome its weaknesses and subsequently to attain a high level of excellence in the areas mentioned. The Board proposes a QA process framework as in the following Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: The Baldridge Approach in QA Process

Baldridge Category	Operational Measures
Category 1—Leadership Expression of values, performance expectations, empowerment, innovation, stakeholders' interests Address accountability and responsibility issues	i. Expression of commitment by top-managers to quality assurance ii. Articulating short- and long-term goals in the content of political and economic goals of the community iii. Participative decision making and empowering groups to identify customers' and stakeholders' expectations iii. Educate the staff and people in the organization about quality and excellence as a form of investment and a means for accountability and responsibility
Category 2—Strategic Planning Developing strategic objectives, action plans, human resource plan, timeline, performance indicators Operational standards and procedures Deployment of plans and monitoring schemes	i. Managers, customer groups, stakeholders, and partners involvement in charting up strategic goals and plans ii. Invite various groups to review and redevelop programs, strategies, facilities, budget, human resource, standards, operational procedures iii. Invite various groups to draw up action plans, performance indicators and standards, and monitoring mechanisms iv. Briefing on QA certification requirement
Category 3—Customer and Market Focus	i. Hold seminars and hearings and invite various interest groups to obtain their values, needs, expectations

Assess customers' values, needs, expectations Assess market trends and competitors Assess relationship and communication with customers, staff, and interest groups	ii. Conduct survey to obtain data on the quality status of products, services, facilities, procedures iii. Obtain suggestions for improvements of products and services
Category 4—Information System and Analysis Examine performance assessment methods for staff Examine organizational performance Determine desired results / outcomes of programs / activities Implications of results / outcomes based on data analysis and seek ways of improvement.	i. In-house workshops on information and information technologies for increasing effectiveness, productivity, and performance ii. Use situational auditing to improve operational speed, procedures, and communication iii. In-house workshops for managers and staff on the benefit-cost impacts of programs, procedures, performance, and quality iv. Promoting awareness of high performance and quality in operations, products, services, facilities v. Communicating improvement areas and actions
Category 5—Human Resource Analyse the development and utilization of staff Build a supportive and conducive work environment Identify standards of staff performance Ongoing organisational growth	i. Set guidelines for staff development to expertise level in a customer-oriented institution ii. Conduct necessary training sessions for different level of staff iii. Build ICT networking system and information system that are easily accessible to other organizations iv. Set up a performance evaluation system and types of incentives
Category 6—Process Management Specifying key processes such as infrastructure requirement, employment, technology utilization, instruction, learning, training, communication, asset growth, etc. Specifying performance standards for key processes	i. Establish supplier certification process ii. Establish quality assurance standards iii. Identify flow of services iv. Determine how performance should be handled

Category 7—Business Results	
Examine performance in key business areas: financial, customer satisfaction, product, services, supplier, operation, human resource, instruction, learning, library Comparisons with competitors in the key business areas	i. Assess results in key business areas ii. Explain improvement measures iii. Chart performance relative to competitors

[Source: Workforce Board Development, USA (2000, p. 9)]

The aspects deliberated in Table 1.3 before were used as the basis to draw up the conceptual framework for this study. It was within the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1.2 (next page) that the issues of quality assurance and accreditation in Oman were situated. Recent developments stress on the importance of comprehensive QA and accreditation, i.e. not only focusing on the management process but inclusive also of the input and output components of the university organization. In relation to Figure 1.2, this study examined the Identification of QA Aspects (the left-side box) and the Preparation and Execution of QA (the middle box) by colleges and universities in Oman.

| Identification of QA Aspects in Colleges and Universities

-Vision, Mission
-Governance
-Effective Management
-Academic Program
-Teaching Staff
-Learning Resources
-Student Selection & Admission
-Program Evaluation
-Physical Facilities
-Financial Resources | → | Preparation and Execution of QA Process by Colleges and Universities

-Resources
-Knowledge on QA Policy, Content and Process
-Action Plan
-Strategies
-Activities | → | Assessment of QA Achievement

QA Assessment Forms/ Checklist (for Students and Officers)

Team Evaluation by Higher Education Authority on QA

Data Analysis and Reporting |

Monitoring

Corrective and Improvement Measures

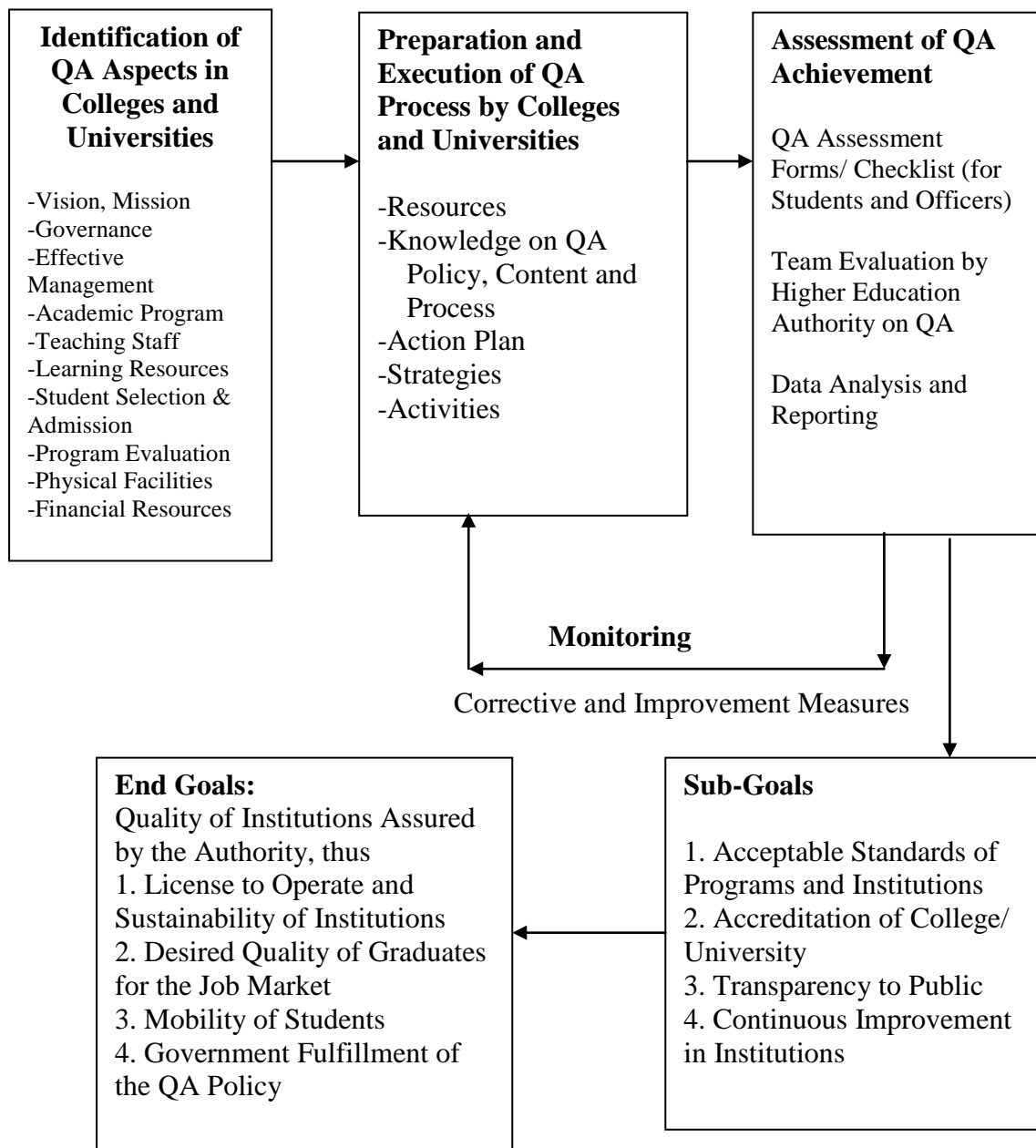| End Goals:
Quality of Institutions Assured by the Authority, thus
1. License to Operate and Sustainability of Institutions
2. Desired Quality of Graduates for the Job Market
3. Mobility of Students
4. Government Fulfillment of the QA Policy | ← | Sub-Goals

1. Acceptable Standards of Programs and Institutions
2. Accreditation of College/ University
3. Transparency to Public
4. Continuous Improvement in Institutions |

Figure 1.2: Conceptual Framework for the Implementation and Assessment of QA for Accreditation in Higher Education

[Source: Constructed from Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2002), Malaysia National Accreditation Board, 2006), ESIB (2002), INQAAHE, 2007), Oman Accreditation Board, 2006]

Theoretically, with reference to Figure 1.2, a QA process must begin with the identification of the necessary QA aspects, which colleges and universities

need to fulfill, in order for the institutions to prepare and execute well by utilizing resources, in designing and planning the necessary actions and strategies within the guidelines stipulated by the QA policy of a government authority. The sub-goals and end goals in Figure 1.2 have been the theoretical bases and debates in much literature in the quality assurance and accreditation area. Figure 1.2 has been used by the Oman government to launch the QA policy.

In this study, there were ten aspects of QA and accreditation that become the foci of investigation—as shown in Figure 1.3 next page. This study also examined the QA process and preparations made by the private colleges and universities in Oman. It must be noted, however, that in a university system, there are two main structural branches, namely the academic branch and the corporate branch. The academic branch is powered by the professional academics from different disciplines and fields of knowledge, and the academics are the ones that determine the breadth and depth of study programs and curriculum. The corporate branch, on the other hand, comprises the non-academic staff of various types and functions dealing in the management of physical, financial, and human resources of the university system.

Furthermore, with reference to Figure 1.2 before, after the aspects identification stage is the preparation for implementation stage, which requires that the government enforcement authority and the institutions must have the resources, knowledge on the QA policy and process, and the action plan and strategies for carrying out the QA policy effectively. Effective implementation of the QA policy, however, requires a specially designed QA Assessment Forms,

QA team evaluation set up by the government, and data analysis and reporting of the QA evaluation done for the use of the government and the institutions evaluated.

A review of literature suggests that the QA policy process has sub-goals and end goals, as enumerated in Figure 1.2. The sub-goals are achievement of acceptable standards of both the institutions and their study programs, accreditation of the institutions and programs, continuous improvement measures for the institutions, and government transparency on the quality of public and private institutions. The end goals of QA, as commonly expounded in European colleges and universities, are the issuance of license to institutions to continue to operate, cross-border mobility of students by credit-transfer of the courses in their study programs, the production of high quality graduates suitable for the job market, and the achievement of QA policy goals by the government (INQAAHE, 2007).
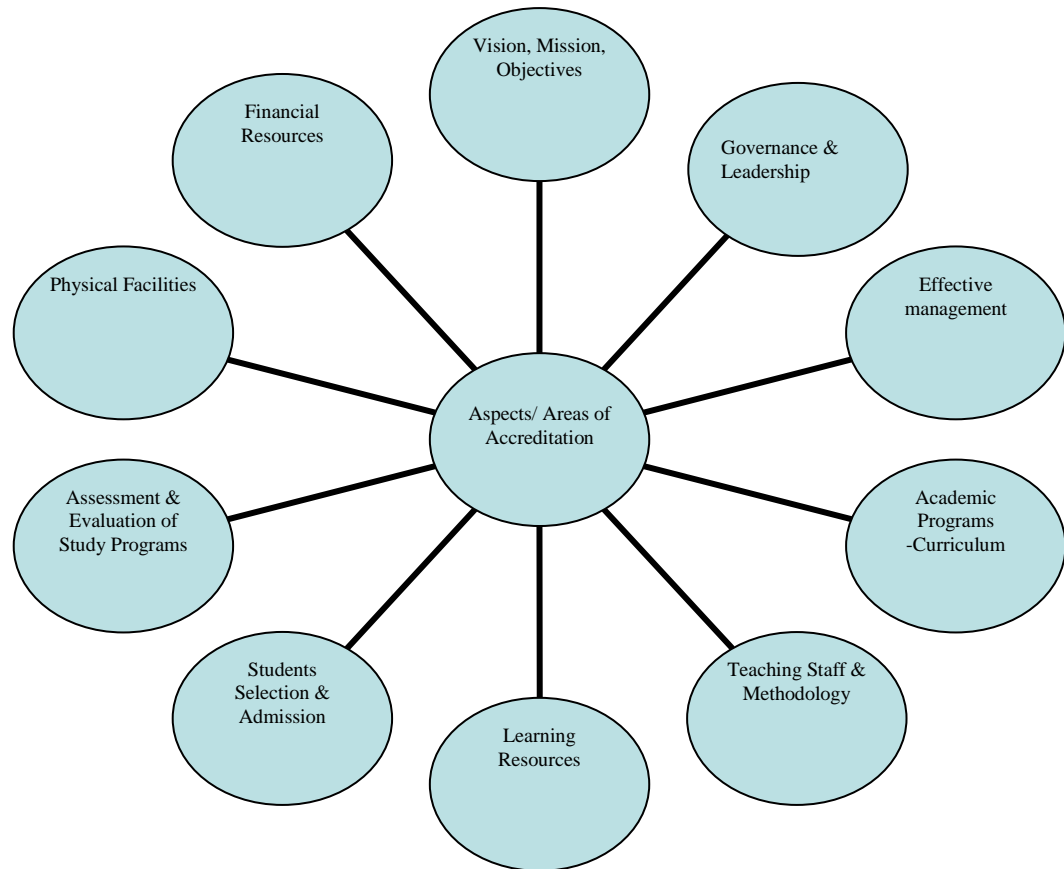
Figure 1.3: The Ten Aspects of QA and Accreditation of a College

[Source: Expanded from documents by the Malaysian Ministry of
Education (2002), Malaysia National Accreditation Board (2006),
INQAAHE (2007), Oman Accreditation Board (2006]

A review of the literature on change in higher education, particularly in relation to changes as a result of quality initiatives, reveals two broad ways of thinking about quality, one relating to context and other relating to stakeholders. However, as graduates of educational programs become more mobile in the global society, the need to establish the comparability of higher education degrees internationally through quality assurance systems becomes more pressing (Tammaro, 2005). Figure 1.4 below shows the three different basic processes for quality assurance.

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │ Quality Assurance│
                    │     Model       │
                    └─────────────────┘
```
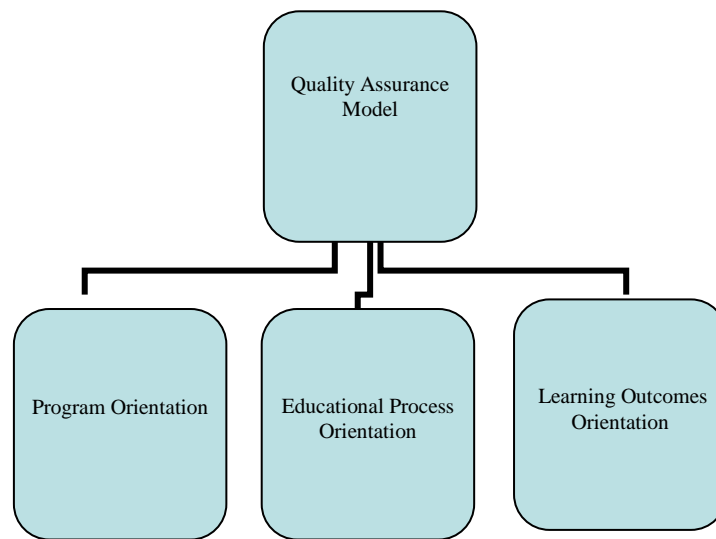
Figure 1.4: Quality Assurance Model for Higher Education

Institutions

Theoretically, Figure 1.4 above posits that a commonly used QA model comprises of three processes, as in the ensuing discussion. The three processes somehow guarantee an overall QA of an institution.

- Program Orientation: attention is given to function such as needs analysis, goal setting, curriculum design, staffing, resource acquisition and allocation. Most accreditation quality assurance models are based on program orientation. Quality indicators balance participants and employers needs and aspiration, Higher Education Institutions in the Sultanate purpose and resources, and societal trends. But program orientation stresses accountability. Staffing quality indicators include attention to the use of effective procedures in teacher selection criteria.

- Education Process Orientation: these quality indicators include the major decision areas for higher education institutions which plan and conduct education programs and institution quality audits which focus on quality control. Educational needs assessment, program improvement and program justification procedures include multiple sources of evaluation. Most of the guidelines used by higher education institution are based on industrial standards such as ISO 9000 and TQM. In all these standards, the focus is on improving quality in higher education from an industry perspective, it means reducing variance around set standards of the educational process. The assumption is that, if the process is well done, the success of the education is assured. Another criterion is based on the assumption that when specifying quality standards, one is defining minimum requirements to identify excellence. Industrial standards usually stress world-class benchmarks and excellence. Benchmarking not only defines what should be done, but also indicates how well it should be done.

- Learning Outcomes Orientation: learning outcomes focus attention on explicit and detailed statements of what students learn; the skills, knowledge, understanding and abilities. Student centered learning is the new approach in higher education institutions and Pors (2001) has measured students' performance and perceptions as elements of quality assurance. This approach has been represented as a paradigm shift from traditional ways to measuring learning, characterized as input approaches to output focused methodologies using learning outcomes and competencies.

The emphasis on outcomes moves the criteria for quality from input (what staff teach) to the outcomes (what students will be able to do). The adoption of learning outcomes approach focuses on the learner and not on the teacher. It promotes the idea of the teacher as facilitator or manager of the learning process and recognizes that much learning takes place outside the classroom, without a teacher present (Adam 2004).

The outcomes assessment process is not only important for quality assurance; it also enables the lifelong learner, from student to full professional status, to trace their progress through the identification and recognition of knowledge and skills acquisition and further training needs (Brine, Feather 2003). Some indicators relate to professionalism by identifying competencies and knowledge mastery, and critical skills such as problem solving and the ability to apply practical knowledge. The quality assurance model in this case is based on individual certification and stresses the transformative concept of quality assessment and prescribes ways to measure it.

In their analysis, Colbex et al. (2005) propose three models of higher education excellence and for accreditation assessment.

i.   The Resource / Reputation model focuses on faculty credentials, ranking, financial capability, external funding, and student academic results.

ii.   Strategic Investment model emphasizes investment return, cost benefit analysis, expenditure control, regulation and compliance, productivity measures such as admission yield, graduation time, graduation rate, and cost per student.

iii.   Client Centered model arises from society's expectations and demands on colleges. It focuses on good educational practices, student satisfaction, faculty availability, alumni feedback, low tuition fees, high aid.

For the case of Oman's higher education system, the drive to implement quality assurance in higher education institutions was largely based on the client centered model, which emphasizes accountability of higher education providers, good educational practices of providers, student satisfaction, the quality of facilities, and the quality of study programs offered.

1.5: Statement of the Research Problems

In reading this section, the phrases underlined constitute the research problems. This is done to better highlight the various research problems surrounding QA implementation in higher education institutions, particularly in Oman. Reference to Figure 1.2 (conceptual framework) as discussed before should be made in order to better understand the arguments of the research problems presented here.

Higher education has profoundly changed in the past few decades. Universities and higher education systems have faced pressures of increasing numbers of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, and implications and impacts of new technologies (Altbach et. al., 1999). So, what kind of quality policy model that takes into account those pressures, particularly dealing with the issue of accountability? From the review of literature, it was found that many theoretical arguments and concerns centered on the demands for accountability by the general public regarding the quality of colleges and universities, especially the new emerging private educational enterprises. This problem is the concern of this research in Oman's higher education system.

The demand for accountability emerged after the post-Second World War period, in which higher education system in France, the Netherlands, and Germany expanded significantly. In Britain, the higher education system started to expand in the early 1960's. Australia, New Zealand and Canada have a similar development during the period. Later on, higher education systems in Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, expanded as well (Armor, 1994). This development has brought forth a whole gamut of issues in higher education systems. The development of mass higher education has not only altered the purposes and organization of higher education, but also has brought about the concerns for standards and quality of study programmes and human resources produced (Armour, 1994). Since the early 1980's, with increasing worldwide economical and technological advancements, many governments have explicitly expressed concerns for quality in higher

education (Green, 1994; Mayhew et. al.; 1990, Van Vught et. al., 1994). It is argued here, therefore, that there is <u>no one single standard quality assurance model</u> available in the international arena: different countries have different quality models of higher education. Therefore, this is another problem for this research to explore the suitable quality assurance model, with its relevant dimensions, for improving the QA process in Oman's higher education system.

Another problem, from the economics perspective, the standard method of estimating the <u>rate of return to higher education investment</u> does not take the quality of higher education into account. It is concerned only with the quantity of higher education and measures this by the years or grades of schooling. It is argued, however, that if the quality of teaching is poor, the quality of graduates is also poor, and thus the investment on human resources for national development is questionable (Lim, 2001). In this regard, investment in higher education must consider quality and standards of study programmes, technologies, and facilities at higher education institutions. The question is: in Oman, is quality assurance a major concern of the public and government so that the investment in higher education by students' parents yields good quality returns that would guarantee good jobs for the graduates and useful for the country's economic and human resource development? This study investigated the QA concern by both the providers and customers, and analyzed the match or mismatch between the two parties.

The concept of quality in higher education is not easy to define (Green 1994, Van Vught 1992). So far, there is <u>no common agreement on the definition</u>

<u>of quality in higher education.</u>   Hence, regarding this problem, this study examined the suitable QA dimensions in relation to the need of accreditation of colleges and universities in Oman, using a modified model of QA based on the experiences of countries like Malaysia, Canada, U.S.A, and United Kingdom.

Since the 1970's, the world wide education reforms have been experiencing waves of reforms based on different paradigms and theories of education effectiveness, and this has resulted in the employment of different strategies and approaches to changing schools and education (Yin Cheong Cheng,1997). Education effectiveness certainly accentuates on the issue of teaching and learning effectiveness, which is also the crux matter of QA and accreditation. Quality of teaching and learning must be improved in order to guarantee quality improvement in institutions.

Two major approaches to quality improvement are quality assurance and quality enhancement. Quality assurance addresses the issue of product or service non-conformance. The aim is to prevent poor-quality product or services from being produced or delivered in the first place by focusing on processes and emphasizing prevention rather than cure. Quality assurance involves ensuring fitness for purpose. Generally quality assurance has been regarded as a means of improving overall quality, but it is sometimes felt to give <u>insufficient weight to teaching and learning</u> (Lomas, 2004).   The problem then, do colleges and universities in Oman give a sufficient weight to quality assurance in teaching and learning?

The application of quality assurance (QA) in the sphere of higher education, while having the same base objectives of defining and recognizing quality, is some what complicated by the important socio-economic role that education plays in the local community development.   In theory, quality is the distinguishing characteristic guiding students and higher education institutions when receiving and providing higher education. However, quality of education should be defined in a contextual manner, taking into account the external environment in which the school is operating and the internal environment in which the teaching-learning process takes place and the home environment of the learners (Govinda and Varghese, 1992).   The research problem then is: Do colleges and universities in Oman belief this theoretical logic?   What is their attitude to QA?

West-Burnham (1992) refers to the issue of "quality in education" as a perennial one which he feels is incapable of a solution as far as edification is concerned, with the definition being that the study of the customers and not that of the suppliers through meeting stated needs, requirements and standards.   This research problem then is: What are the views of customers, namely students, and the higher education institutions in Oman regarding the need for meeting the required standards in services, instruction, and study programs?   This study will undertake to study this problem.

In addition, increased costs to customers, companies, and nations due to poor quality have fostered a renewed appreciation of the quality assurance function. Japan initiated a quality revolution in the 1970's and has since relived

world wide recognition for its achievement (Crosby, 1979). The United States
joined the quality race in the mid-1980s and has also made rapid advances
(Walton, 1986). More recently Europeans have launched cooperative efforts to
improve quality. Today, most managers recognize that <u>quality must focus on
linkages</u> among functions across entire organizations. This is the principle of
Total Quality Management (Deming, 1986). Total Quality Management (TQM)
is a management concept that focuses the collective efforts of all managers and
employees on satisfying customers' expectations by continually <u>improving
operations, management processes, and products</u> (Berry, 1991).

Because of the popularity of TQM, many broadly accepted models
promoting and improving quality have been designed. Organizations believe that
they should implement two or more models to deliver quality products or service
to their customers. The Baldrige Award, Deming prize, and ISO 9000
Registration are three among many quality systems that may be taken together to
establish excellent TQM programs. Table 1.3 below gives a brief explanation of
the quality awards for higher education institutions.

Table 1.3: Quality System and Important Issues Facing Higher Education

System	Focus	Important Issues for higher education
Baldrige Award	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Satisfaction and Retention (i.e, Students, Employees, Parents, Alumni, Taxpayers)
Deming Prize	Statistical Methods	Institutional Research and assessment (i.e., Enrollment Patterns, Student Progress, Faculty Performance, Drop-out Rates, Recruitment Activities)
ISO 9000	Documentation	Accreditation and Evaluation (i.e., Curriculum Analysis, Program Requirements, Facilities Analysis)

[Source: Summarised from Workforce Development Series, 2000, pp.4-10]

The problem arises from this table is: What is the emphasis of QA by colleges and universities in Oman? This study then attempted to explore the emphasis.

In 1987, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (a Geneva, Switzerland based organization composed of 92 member countries) published a series of quality system standards. These standards are called ISO 9000. The American Society for Quality Control (ASQC) defined the goal of ISO 9000 as "international exchange of goods and services and development of cooperation into the sphere of intellectual, scientific, technological, and economic activity". The problem for Oman then is about internationalization of its colleges and universities so that they are of reputable international standard. However,

what is the attitude of the private colleges and universities in Oman regarding quality (by ISO criteria), quality assurance, and accreditation?

ISO 9000 promotes standards to improve productivity and reduce costs in the changing global marketplace. The ISO 9000 standards provide both general guidelines and contractual agreements for meeting quality requirements. Several countries have adopted ISO 9000 and attached special names to it. BS 5750 in Britain, DIN ISO 9000 in Denmark, NS ISO 9000 in Norway, AS 3900 in Australia, Q 90 in the U.S., and Defense standard AQAP-1, which has been used for qualification of NATO defense suppliers. In the European countries (EC), the series is implemented as EN 2900. These national and regional implementations are essentially the same, although minor differences may occur due to language translations (Chua, 1992).

In 1992, the ISO issued an updated guideline to the standard known as ISO 9004-2, which focused on the service sector e.g. education as a service sector (International Organization for Standardization, 1992). To encourage TQM implementation in academia, a new effort is underway to apply the MBNQA criteria to academic organizations as part of a pilot program, and higher education institutions were invited to submit applications, although no awards were to be given in 1995. The new criteria provide guidance for creating mechanisms for academic institutions to implement TQM (Walker, 1995). Technology teacher educators should be at the fore front of this development.

The rapid expansion of activities, projects and programs in the field of internationalization has been without cost. Finances followed policies only hesitatingly and in many institutions in the 1970s and 1980s internationalization was carried out with a great deal of good will and voluntarism. Institutions' marketing initiatives in the 1980s, in which recruitment of foreign students was seen as an investment in order to generate additional income compensating for declining governmental funding, have led in a number of institutions, for example in the UK, to quality problems and resulted in criticism from students and staff. This, together with the more general and increasingly comprehensive tendency of quality assurance in higher education, has given way to concern for the quality of the internationalization processes and policies themselves (Dirk Van Damme, 2000).

The Pragmatic Problems of Implementing QA Policy in Higher Education

However, industrial quality practices are being accepted by higher education at a very slow rate. Seymour (1991) and Marchese (1991) documented benefits and frustrations of campuses that were implementing TQM systems. Walker (1995) indicated that entire universities will not accept TQM with open arms. Some faculty or administrators continue to resist TQM in education. Resistance may be attributed to unwillingness to change old systems in higher education, academic decision have traditionally been made through peer processes and collegial bodies. Dominance of academic decision-making about quality is now being directly challenged by the quality movement's emphasis on customers (Lindsay, 1994).

Nevertheless, putting quality assurance into practice in higher education institutions is problematic because it requires much <u>deliberation and documentation of many details in the operation process,</u> ranging from marketing to student admission, curriculum design, instruction, learning materials, technology, facilities, examinations, human resource, and student graduation. Implementation of quality assurance policy either at the organizational level or the national level, therefore, will cause a massive upheaval and reconstruction in the operation system. Consequently, this leads to stress and anxiety among staff, compulsion to attend meetings and workshops, and compulsion to adhere to standards and procedures made. In this regard, staff should be made to understand that quality assurance policy is a necessity for the <u>sustainability of the organization</u> and, thus, deriving benefits for every staff.

Consequential Relationship Problem of QA with Accreditation

The essential problem for this research is that quality assurance (QA) is a <u>prerequisite for accreditation</u>. This is a vital, direct unilateral relationship between the two concepts, which have been put into practice in many higher education systems in the world for the purpose of maintaining the standard of higher education institutions and their curriculum and graduates to be of reputable quality, readily acknowledged to be best in the global arena.

Accreditation is based on an evaluation done at a specific point in time, normally with reference to specific area of the institutions (a course or facility).

This normally leads to the awarding of certificate or recognition that the institution or part therefore meets certain standards. When accrediting, quality assurance should be the guarantee that the standard measured in the accreditation process can be upheld in the long term. Thus accreditation cannot be said to be complete unless the three steps outlined in the quality assurance and accreditation policy are enacted and the process is seen as ongoing.

The importance of accreditation for higher education institutions can be stated in three points from the perspective of students (ESIB, 2002):

• Accreditation provides students with programs, which are clearly defined and appropriate. Accreditation provides added assurance that the program in which students are enrolled or are considering enrolling is capable of achieving what it sets out to do.

• Accreditation facilitates the mobility of students because it provides the higher education institutions with independent approval of the various programs at other institutions where a student can come from. This can lead to the development of pre-recognition of degrees.

• Accreditation must facilitate the recognition of degrees in other countries and thus facilitate the mobility of graduates.

Differential Implementation of QA Policy in the Sultanate of Oman

All countries have some kind of quality assurance mechanism in place, although they differ significantly in terms of purpose, focus and organization. For example, the vigor of QA policy in Oman differs according to the classification

of higher education institutions, namely: (1) Universities; (2) University Colleges and (3) Higher Education Colleges (including academies, institutes, etc). The characteristics of these three types of institution, including their different rights and responsibilities are detailed in Chapter Three of this study (Ministry of Higher Education Document, 2004).

The classification system in The Sultanate of Oman has set the standards for recognition of an "institution of higher education". It further specifies what kinds of institutions may be recognized as Universities or University Colleges or Colleges of Higher Education. There is a clear distinction between the criteria for Universities and for University Colleges, both of which offer graduate degrees. (Ministry of Higher Education Document, 2004). Figure 1.5 shows the classification system in Oman.

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  Classification │
                    │     System      │
                    └────────┬────────┘
          ┌──────────────────┼──────────────────┐
  ┌───────────────┐  ┌───────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
  │  Universities │  │  University   │  │  Colleges of     │
  │               │  │   Colleges    │  │  Higher          │
  │               │  │               │  │  Education       │
  └───────────────┘  └───────────────┘  └──────────────────┘
```
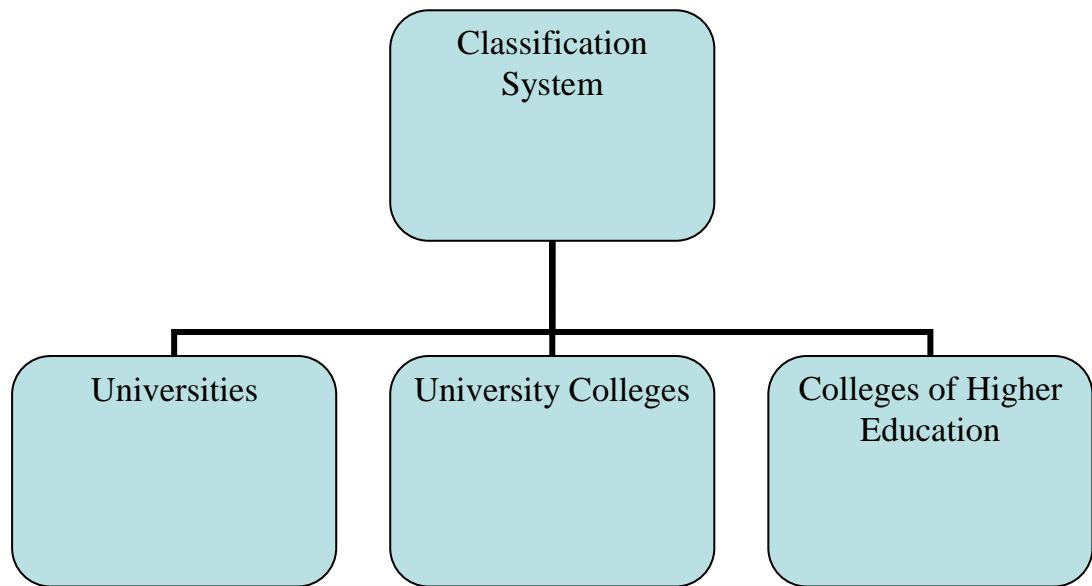
Figure 1.5: Classification of Higher Education Institution in Oman

[Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Oman, 2004, p. 8]

Higher education programs are offered by a variety of higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman, both public and private. Some have partnership arrangements with outside institutions, while others operate independently. Some institutions offer a wide range of programs and others specialize in certain fields. The diversity has the advantage of offering a range of choice for students. At the same time, diversity also creates the possibility of confusion, unless the nature and responsibilities of different types of organization are clearly understood.

Within their different mandates, institutions of higher education have common responsibilities. All institutions of higher education must accept the primary responsibility of upholding the quality and relevance of their programs and services. Higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman must put into

place the QA policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programs and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the <u>continuous enhancement of quality</u>. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

1.6: Purposes and Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the extent of implementation made by private colleges and universities in the Sultanate of Oman in ten aspects of quality assurance policy for institutional accreditation by the government. The aspects of interest were:

- Mission

- Governance

- Effectiveness of Management

- Academic Program

- Teaching Staff

- Learning Resources (library, laboratories, and educational technology)

- Students Selection, Admission, and Services

- Study Programs Evaluation

- Physical Facilities

- Financial Resources

The extent of QA implementation could be assessed by students' and managers' feedbacks on the curriculum, resources, and management operations. Apart from that, the other purposes of this study were to identify the main factors in student QA assessment model of study programs in private colleges and universities in Oman, and to examine the management practices, approaches, and actions by the private colleges and universities in Oman in implementing quality assurance for institutional accreditation.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To analyze students' perceptions regarding the quality of study programs, facilities, and instruction at some private colleges and universities in Oman.

2. To identify the main factors and their interrelations in the student QA assessment model in private colleges and universities in Oman.

3. To analyze the perceptions of private college and university managers regarding the extent and level in ten aspects of QA policy implementation in Oman.

4. To explore the views of private college and university managers on how they carried out and what are their approaches and techniques in implementing the ten aspects of QA policy.

1.7: Research Questions

With regards to the purposes of the study, this research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Focusing on students as the main customer, what are their perceptions of the quality of study programs and infrastructure of private colleges and universities in Oman?

2. Based on students' survey responses, what are the main factors to be considered and their interrelations in the QA assessment model for private higher education institutions in Oman?

3. In general, based on college and university managers' perceptions, what are the extent and level of implementation in ten aspects of quality assurance for accreditation undertaken by private colleges and universities in Oman?

4. In terms of college or university management, what are the managers of private colleges/ universities' responses in carrying out the ten aspects of quality assurance in Oman?

5. Based on the college or university managers' experience as policy implementers, generally what are the main approaches and techniques used by college/ university managers in implementing quality assurance process in Oman?

1.8: Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in the idea that the private higher education in the Sultanate of Oman is still new comparing with other countries, and due to the expanding involvement of the private sector in the field of higher education, the knowledge on quality assurance and accrediting criterion will help to control the institutions from running adrift and paying attention to profits only and consequently ignoring the quality and the main objectives behind their establishment. Therefore, the availability or the existence of rationed criterion for accreditation and the continuous process of self-accreditation by higher education institutions will serve the development of human resources and educational process in the Sultanate of Oman. In addition, due to the fact that private higher education institutions have become a national and social necessity imposed by the conditions of privatization, which is common today in many parts of the world, it is then a must for monitoring and maintaining quality of higher education.

In addition, the quality assurance checklist developed in this study (as in Appendix 1) could be used as an instrument by the Ministry concerned in Oman to monitor from to time the quality initiatives performed by private colleges and universities. Data from the periodic assessment could be used for providing advice and assistance to the private colleges and universities in their management process towards quality, particularly in the ten areas of QA investigated by this study.

Apart from that, the data collection process for this research might provide the initial impetus for the QA policy implementation in Oman's higher education, and thus would stimulate awareness among college and university managers that they must pay serious attention to QA in order to get accreditation.

The researcher hoped that the QA conceptual framework and models used in this study would be used as the foundation for implementing QA and accreditation policy by the Ministry of Higher Education of Oman in the future. More importantly, the findings from this study would help to inform the public and the decision makers in the education system of Oman about the actions and initiatives done by public colleges and universities so far in implementing the said policy for fulfilling the notions of accountability and international quality. The constraints and problems faced by the private higher education institutions in the QA policy implementation could be used as a useful input in managing the QA implementation process in the future.

In terms of theoretical input, the findings of this study would provide new insights on the process and technicalities of policy implementation theory, accountability theory, TQM theory, Fullan's change theory or Senge's learning organization theory, particularly in Oman's education system context. This is because the implementation of QA in Oman may be considered as a reformative change program which is initiated and planned by the government.

1.9: Limitations of the Study

This study was largely practical oriented, i.e. to examine what was the situation of QA policy implementation by private colleges and universities in Oman; hence it was not driven by the need to establish a workable or non-workable theoretical model on quality assurance, or change, or learning organization. Probably, it would just reiterate any typical policy implementation model. Nevertheless, the findings of this study would be linked and argued, wherever possible, to the theories discussed before.

This study initially targeted respondents (managers and students) in 18 private institutions in Oman as the sample for the study; however, due to budget constraints and lack of co-operation from the management of some colleges and universities from 10 institutions, only respondents in the other 8 institutions ones were involved in the study. Thus, the findings from this study had a less generalizable extent than the initial expectation. However, the government of Oman could still use the findings of this study as the basis to monitor the QA policy implementation in private institutions.

The QA survey instrument used in this study was adapted from a few sources relevant for Oman's higher education accreditation policy purpose. In particular, the Malaysian experience, especially by the National Accreditation Board which monitored quality assurance of study programmes and degrees in colleges and universities, was incorporated in this study. From the adaptation process, the survey instrument used in this study, especially for managers, was rather long in order to cover ten aspects of QA. Thus, to minimize boredom and

unreliability of data, the survey process was broken down into several phases, and this could contribute to discontinuity of mood and willingness in co-operation in answering the survey. Follow-up interviews with managers were made in order to have a close examination of private colleges and universities and also to cross-check the goodness of survey data collected.

1.10: Operational Definition of Terms

Quality

In this study, quality refers to traditional concept of quality as associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. Extremely high standard of production, delivery and presentation are set, which can only be achieved with the use of some resources. The notion of exclusivity is implied (Stella,2005).

Quality Assurance Process

Quality assurance process may examine many academic and administrative aspects of the entity (institution or program) being reviewed and collect data on those aspects. However, the information that is gathered does not speak for itself; an evaluation judgment must be interpreted in the light of some prior question. This use of evidence, judged against an evaluative frame work, leads to decisions that have important consequences (Stella, 2005).

"Quality" is a multi-dimensional concept; it is dynamic in and expresses itself in continuous innovation (Brennan -1992). Clearly, in ideal situation pro-active universities they develop systems for internal quality management with an external assessment of the relevant parameters of quality. Parameters of quality are, for example:

- The fitness of the objectives and aims of higher education in each study programme for students who will live in a dynamic, increasingly professional and flexible word;

- The fitness of the continent of programs with a view to the state of the art in the underlying areas of knowledge ('disciplines') and with a view to the changes in the environment;

- The results of higher education in terms of standards for graduates, knowledge, skills and attitudes;

- Facilities, organization of the programs, etc.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The term "quality assurance" refers to all the policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of quality. Quality assurance is defined as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced (CHEA, 2003).

For this study, quality assurance was conceptualized as in the section on conceptual framework discussed before and it is then operationalised into a survey questionnaire used for data collection. The questionnaire as in Appendix 1 comprised ten operational aspects as follows.

- Mission

- Governance

- Effective Management

- Academic Program

- Teaching Staff

- Learning Resources (library, laboratories, and educational technology)

- Student Selection, Admission and Services

- Study Programs Evaluation

- Physical Facilities

- Financial Resources

Accreditation Process

'Accreditation' means verification of acceptable standards or acceptable quality, and it is the result that shows the institution ability to achieve the goals for which it was established and these through achieving minimum limit of standards that must be available at the similar institutions in order to complete their own tasks. This process in higher education involves two sequential stages, each one completing the other, and they are institutional accreditation and program accreditation.

- Institutional Accreditation: - It means the ability of higher education institution to achieve the general goal behind its existence as higher education institution and providing the necessary requirements to achieve that goal in addition to improving their goals in away goes in line with the social and economic changes. Institutional accreditation criterion involves the scientific organization for higher education institution, administrative organization, premises, scientific equipments, references in addition to the scientific technologies provided by higher education institutions.

- Program accreditation: - it means the institution ability to carry out a specified academic program, the most important factors that influence the accrediting of the program and its goals, managing it, efficiency of the teaching staff, teaching plan, and availability of laboratories, scientific Medias, modern teaching technology, library services and academic services. Further, criterion of program accreditation involves laboratories supplies, workshops, educational medias, scientific qualification and the experience that teaching staff has in addition of the specialized references.

Accredited colleges/universities and programs usually are found to:

- Have educationally appropriate objectives as defined over time by the higher education community;
- Have the financial, human and physical resources needed to achieve these objectives;
- Have demonstrated that it is achieving the objectives; and

- Have provided sufficient evidence to support the belief and it will continue to achieve its objectives for some reasonable time into the future.

1.11: Summary

Many countries have national systems for qualifications which are comprehensive, including all levels of education and training. In the Sultanate of Oman, the national framework is designed to provide consistency in program requirements and award titles, as well as to provide equivalence of standards in comparison with reputable and accredited international institutions of higher education.

Quality assurance is one of the new interests in the field of higher education and this why there are little studies and research in this field. The assurance of quality and standards is important. Higher education in a globalized economy implies cross-national purchaser-provider relationship, and brings to the fore the following purposes for extra-institutional quality assurance:

- The dissemination of information to the public and other interested parties about quality and standards;
- Give credibility and quality awards ; and
- The engendering of confidence in customers and the public that they will be making a worthwhile investment when they enroll in a program (Yorke, 2002).

Due to its pioneering nature, this research project focused on the implementation of quality assurance policy by some private colleges and universities in the Sultanate of Oman. Therefore, this study, dealt with issues such as the acceptance, readiness, preparation, operation, constraints, and assistance required by the colleges and universities concerned in managing the affairs of quality assurance for the purpose of getting accreditation by the government of Oman. These were some important typical issues in policy implementation area.

Relevant literature on quality assurance and accreditation was sought and reviewed, in particular on theoretical models, theoretical arguments, and implementation methods. The literature discussed before in the sections on the 'problem statement' and the 'conceptual framework of the study' largely guided this study until its completion.