Dr. Ahmed Hassan Mohammed Al Bulushi

Building Capacity

TBY talks to Dr. Ahmed Hassan Mohammed Al Bulushi, Acting Dean of the Caledonian College of Engineering, on ensuring quality standards, preparing students for the workforce, and new focus points.

THE BUSINESS YEAR The Caledonian College of Engineering (CCE) was founded in 1996. How has it developed since then?

DR. AHMED AL BULUSHI CCE was officially inaugurated in November 1997, and it is the first private higher education college specializing in technology and engineering. We only teach engineering in different disciplines, and we are affiliated with Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) in Scotland. Our four-year degree programs are offered in Oman, but the qualification comes from Scotland. It is a fully-fledged “Omanized” curriculum that is suitable for the Omani context. The entire program is quality assured and accredited by GCU. We also have other affiliates, such as the Vello Institute of Technology University in India. We started by offering diplomas in franchise arrangements, and today we have reached to a level where we offer the entire range of degree programs in Oman with fully fledged autonomous university college status. Our 17 years of experience have enabled us full control over our curriculum and the management of our operations.

How involved are your partners in the day-to-day curriculum?

There is no day-to-day involvement of the affiliates. After 17 years, they trust that we are well established and that we have our own curriculum, our own staff, and our own quality assurance system. They conduct an annual review of the college, the process, and procedures, and we have quality assurance mechanisms from the UK that our affiliates use to monitor us. This includes external examiners, assessment boards, academic counsels, and affiliates who are members of our governing council, and so there are different mechanisms to assure that the quality and standards are on par with international standards and practices.

How important are your international affiliations?

We have around 24 internationally affiliated universities and research institutes that we work with that are available to both students and staff. The university takes part in global exchange programs, including in the US, Asia, and Europe. We also have staff members on study exchange, where they go and teach at affiliate universities that exchange staff members here. Students tend to spend a month at an affiliate university, institute, or organization that we have an agreement with. We have an affiliation with top French institutes, in Toulouse for example, and we have a collaborative research agreement with a German institute, as well as French, UK, and US institutes. Globally, we are very well connected. These connections offer us tremendous learning and exchange opportunities that help us in capacity building.
Are you looking to expand your international affiliations?
Yes, we have been in discussions with universities in Russia, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the US. The higher education sector is international. Internationalization and collaboration is one of the main factors when it comes to a college’s recognition. This is particularly important when an international body wants to rank you and measure your performance, because they look at these collaborations. At CCE we make a point to use all the collaboration agreements once they are established. Therefore, our expansion in building relations with international institutions is systematic and well thought out.

What are the current faculty and student numbers at the college?
We are the biggest specialized college in the Omani private higher education sector in terms of size, with 3,200 students and around 300 staff spread over two campuses. In terms of student numbers, we are very conservative. We want to control the number of students we recruit and only attract the highest caliber students who can complete our programs, because they are very challenging. Every year, we accept about 700 students maximum. We do not really accept more than that since we believe in quality rather than quantity.

How important is R&D for CCE?
If you compare us with other private institutions in Oman, I think we are in the top ranking in terms of collaborative research. We spend around $2 million on research in Oman, and we are funded by the Research Council and by external EU organizations. We are very good at that and have different areas of interest. We have dedicated research centers and centers of excellence in renewable energy, waste to energy, and solar power. We are currently talking to major oil and gas companies regarding research in water quality testing and water and oil mixing, for example. We have excellent prospects in industry for our graduates. Right from the beginning, we established good relations with industry, and we have advisory boards where members from the industry discuss our programs and our students as their future employees. As a result, our programs are always up to date and aligned with what industry wants.

How do you ensure your graduates are positioned well for industry?
There are two forums, the Industry Advisor Group, which meets at least once a year, and the Industry Interactive Group, which meets twice a year. They mainly provide input for new programs in particular, and therefore our programs are very close to the needs of industry. What differentiates the programs offered by CCE is the level of practical experience, dedicated modules, and compulsory industry placement. Students cannot graduate unless they fulfill work placement. CCE produces about 50% of all the engineers in Oman; we are the biggest college in this area, bigger than the Engineering Faculty at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). We have to monitor our graduates. Recent feedback from major employers such as OmanTel and PDO, for example, was that our students are doing very well in the field.

What percentage of your graduates find employment immediately after graduating?
Over 80% of graduating students go directly into employment. In fact, our students are usually employed in their final year, before they graduate. The remainder continue on with higher education or establish their own businesses. Again, this is another one of our focuses, which has been to develop entrepreneurs. Higher education in Oman is re-orientating itself toward entrepreneurship. CCE started this process about four or five years ago. Within the engineering curriculum, we have specific entrepreneurial, management, HR, and soft-skill modules built into the engineering course; this is unique to CCE programs.
How important is the vocational element of your courses?

Omani industrial companies are very demanding; they wanted the students to graduate as someone that is academically qualified, and at the same time have technical know-how and troubleshoot at the same time. In the West, when a student graduates with a set of skills, they join the workforce, and they receive training; however, in Oman the industry wants us to do the training as well. It is a big challenge, but we have tried to close this gap between academic and practical training, and so far we have been successful. And with the revised curriculum that we will offer from September 2013, this will be further enhanced.

What new courses and areas of academic expansion are you planning to open up?

CCE has always been the leader and pioneer in all disciplines within the engineering department. We are now focusing on new technologies in petroleum, oil and gas, and also aviation and for that we have a new partner from France called ENAC, which is the number one university in Europe in the aviation sector. The other sector is transportation, and we are focusing on that because of the transportation developments in the country. Of course, construction is a major sector in Oman, with infrastructure development and government expenditure in that area increasing, and so our focus is there also. We have a construction management program, but we want to expand it, and we are concentrating on specific areas within construction so we can produce different engineers for the present as well as future needs of the country and the region.

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