

# Managing constraints in teaching and learning in higher education in Oman: Understanding market orientation and quality service delivery

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**Abstract-** *The main thrust of this research is to contribute to theory building in the Theory of Constraints (TOC) in logistics management and its applicability in Oman Higher Education Institutions (referred to as HEI right through), with focus on colleges and universities. One of the two major theories of higher education said a blend of theory and practice was the only way to get quality graduates in HEI. The research will explore gaps in knowledge regarding these theories as a contribution to knowledge. Logistics will be looked at in this research as a support function for marketing strategy. Market orientation is a company philosophy focused on discovering and meeting the needs and desires of company or organizational customers through its products mix, and in this instance HEI will be expected to meet foremost the needs of industry and government as employers of graduated students, then the needs of students and society. Axtell quoting Lombardi argued that the quality of university research drove the quality, breadth, and depth of the undergraduate curriculum and that teaching delivered the state of current knowledge while research pursued knowledge at the boundaries of our current understanding, (Axtell, 2016:3510). Field research would shed light on research-teaching nexus in Oman compared to the GCC and the world at large. This will be an intensive in-depth single case study, with Oman being the case. This research paper focused on the management of constraints in higher education teaching and learning in Oman and understanding market orientation and quality service delivery. This paper is constructed from the researcher's PhD thesis as a way of disseminating critical new knowledge on higher education in Oman and globally, for the betterment and benefit of academia and society.*

**Keywords-** *Constraints; Market orientation; HEI; OAAA; Teacher; Feedback; Competition; GCC ; Omanisation; College*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Alternative education in the form of vocational or technical training was a key feature of developed, thriving economies, given its demonstrated capacity to engender entrepreneurship and provide skills for a diverse population and this was still a new concept in Oman, while the country was also grappling with the gap between educational outcomes and labour market demands or requirements, which is everybody's concern globally in educational planning and policy making, (Al-Ani, 2016)[2]. **Also refer to Appendices 1-7 on these issues.** The curriculum in many colleges was not well aligned with the basic aims that most faculty members, academic leaders and employers considered essential, (Bok, 2017:25)[10]. It was no secret that Oman did not have polytechnic colleges neither did it have polytechnic universities nor compulsory internship. This had resulted in importation of almost all artisans, journeymen, technicians and technologists required to drive a modern economy and modern private sector and maintain systems in government ministries and local authorities. Couldn't that be the solution to the country's ballooning unemployment problem now hovering at about 50 000 college graduates and then high school graduates added onto that number? Was this not a case where there was overproduction of university graduates in other areas, mainly white collar graduates, and inadequate or no

production of the right required manpower in many technical areas? Surely rationalization was required, and innovation into apprenticeship training and introduction of compulsory internship for all colleges and universities in Oman for strategic fit with labour market requirements? Polytechnics could be set up in each governorate as was the case in many Western and other countries and proper consultations done with industry to operationalize apprenticeship training and education in Oman as it was very complex. Germany had the lowest unemployment rate because of that. Oman has got seven Colleges of Technology which are doing excellent work for the nation but apprenticeship training and education was not part of their syllabi. Researcher strongly believes that absence of apprenticeship training and education had not been good for Oman as confirmed by evidence on the ground by many researchers and government reports. Vocational education raised pay more than academic coursework, it reduced unemployment more than academic coursework, boosted high school graduation rates and had less drop outs, it reduced and deterred crime, it prepared students for specific jobs, it provided extra income, it enriches society more than it enriched the students themselves, society gained the extra productivity, it built students' skills and had high returns, it prepared students for common jobs, it also trained the crime prone students into good citizens and productive work and was less prone to credential inflation or grade inflation,

whereas classic college preparation classes like literature, foreign language and history fell short because they prepared students for rare jobs, (Caplan, 2018:227-229)[12]. Researcher would add that it promoted entrepreneurship and self-reliance than any other type of education. With GCC countries fighting to create jobs for the multitudes of their unemployed young people, this could be their panacea, considering Oman's own demographic mix of 85% of population being 35 years and below, and the rest (15%) above 35 years. Quality of higher education was considered to be one of the most important aspects of human resource development, creation of new knowledge and social strength for any country, therefore industry had to be heavily involved in all college activities like curriculum development, guest lectures, college advisory boards, learning outcomes and collaborative arrangements for students to get industrial experience, argued Nadim and Al-Hinai in their clarion and passionate call on academia-industry collaboration and quality in HEI, (2016:147-156)[23]. Where did Oman stand on this? Field research would unravel the truth.

### **1.1 Fundamental Responsibilities of HEI**

A college had five fundamental responsibilities:-

- a. Meeting stakeholder needs, especially its students;
- b. Keep its promises;
- c. Ensuring its health and well-being, and deploy resources effectively, prudently and efficiently which is stewardship;
- d. Serving the public good; and finally
- e. Demonstrating its quality and effectiveness in fulfilling those responsibilities (Suskie, 2015:52)

Field research would shed light on whether Oman HEI were complying with all these sacrosanct objectives. Non-compliant graduates and unemployed graduates (when jobs are there) are definitely non-compliance issues and an indictment on any HEI, which has a backlash effect.

### **1.2 Oman and Global HEI History and Development**

Since the ascendancy of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said in Oman education has received first priority in the Sultanate of Oman. This has been part of the Oman national development strategy to build a modern state, this was said by Oman Minister of Education, Yahya Bin Saud Al Sulaiman in the United Nations Report, National Report of the Sultanate of Oman 2008, (Sulaiman, 2008:11)[29]. The Oman government was a very caring government that had always wanted its citizens to have the best quality of life and progress and scored top spot in the Most Developed Country in 40 years in world history under the United Nations Development Index. Unfortunately graduate unemployment and suitability for labour market continued to haunt the country, which has unsettled many and solutions are definitely required (see Appendices 1-7). The competition for students, staff, graduate employment, investors and funding in the higher education sector had intensified globally and Oman was no exception. Successfully managing HEI had become

central to survival, profitability (for private HEI), credibility, retaining accreditation license, being respected by students/employers/society and remaining in business (refer to Appendices 1 to 6). There was also the feel good factor that goes with doing a good job for your nation and society. The Oman Majlis Ashura (Oman Parliament), was dominated by discussions on public demand for higher education as a human right, and the need to build upon human resources to achieve modernization and Oman citizens recognized the benefits of higher education for their children, not least by the fact that they had started to pay for private colleges and universities, (Donn and Issan, 2017:174:183)[17]. Private colleges had always played a pivotal role in supplementing government efforts to provide higher education to Oman society, and government was quite happy with that contribution too. Cooperation between government and private HEI in Oman was quite cordial and at its best. Students joined college for many reasons, chief among them being to get a better job, being very well off financially, hoping to learn more about things that interest them, to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas, influencing social values, helping others who are in difficulty, developing a meaningful philosophy in life, keeping up to date with political affairs, helping to promote racial understanding, becoming a community leader, increasing understanding of other countries and cultures and protecting the environment, (Bok, 2017:17)[10]. But one wonders why there were toxic disciplinary and commitment issues despite these noble desires by students. Was it peer pressure, teachers, families or environment that distracted some of these brilliant students?

### **1.3 Why this research?**

The major reason giving rise to this research was the high unemployment rate amongst Oman graduates while in some cases the country would still be recruiting expatriates/foreigners in the same skills areas, as reflected in appendices referred to earlier on. That obviously raises many questions and points to a lack of strategic fit and market orientation for some locally educated graduates as confirmed by government itself and Oman Parliament (Majlis Ashura). Research needed to tell society scientifically where the problems came from and possible solutions or mitigating measures. Was higher education doing justice to students and society, and if not why, and what could be done as a long term solution? There were many reasons why employers may had difficulty hiring qualified employees even though plenty of college graduates could not find suitable jobs and this was due to many reasons like graduates did not possess sufficient skills and other attributes that employers were seeking, the amount students learnt in college had declined in recent decades, many current graduates were very weak in such fundamental competencies such as writing and critical thinking, large percentages of college graduates were deficient in reading comprehension, quantitative

skills and problem solving, they lacked so-called soft skills such as reliability, conscientiousness, ability to work with others which employers considered essential, (Bok, 2017:11)[10]. Some people might argue that employers were their own enemies as there wasn't enough consultations with academia to make the latter aware of those shortcomings and have them rectified. It could further be argued that employers had divorced themselves from academia leading to complete dislocation and information flow. Surely employers should be on academic boards and actively have regular consultative meetings with academia for everybody's benefit. Others could argue that the excuses given by some employers that local graduates were not suitable for given jobs may not be true where vested personal interests were at play. The researcher had been to many companies, banks and government departments where local Oman graduates were doing exceptionally well. Since government reports said it was about 53% of graduates who could not get jobs definitely corrective action was required. Part of the 53% may not be getting jobs due to a depressed economy due to austerity not quality of their qualifications, which was simple economic reality. It was also fact that when the economy was in bad shape and market was saturated with graduates the law of supply and demand said that employers would be more choosy, and favouritism/cronyism could not be ruled out too, no matter you are in which country. A generalized statement did not solve anything. Research had to establish what actual percentage was really unsuitable for jobs in their completed diplomas or degrees with evidence, and what was the long-term solution. This research seeks to provide part of the answers to this question. Interviewing a large number of a cross section of an equal number of Omani and expatriate managers, or doing a balanced comprehensive survey, could expose some credible insights, if it was true that was the case, and the magnitude of the problem. The same managers could be asked remedial and corrective measures which could be considered by HEI together with standard HEI management theories and best practices. It was quite strange why this scenario persisted when everybody did not want it, including government. Employers were also parents whose children were affected by these quality problems as well as toxic social problems emanating from unemployed youths like being social cases/burden for government and society, crime, despondence, hopelessness, depreciation of skills and lack of respect for HEIs as they were not delivering the dream job and quality life promised. The unanswered question was why an imperfect system would persist when accreditation agencies were there, as well as policing by the Ministry of Higher Education? But reality was that education was a very complex and long value chain with many interest groups and players at different stages of the value chain, and was never easy to run in any country. Internal HEI factors and externalities negatively impacting HEI needed close scrutiny and cooperation across the board as well as

systematic solutions which did not result in unintended negative consequences.

Lebanon was recognized as the country with the best education system in the Middle East. Oman had developed excellent higher education facilities, curricular, infrastructure, teachers with masters and PhDs and IT systems, but observation showed that many students were not able to acquire knowledge and skills to the required levels because of externalities in the form of weak educational background from school, unprepared mindset for higher studies and attitude towards hard work, and moreover the students entered university not only with a weak academic base/basic skills but also with a low motivation mindset focused on memorizing to pass examinations and a get a degree, and they lacked critical thinking and an independent mindset, (Baporikar and Shah, 2012:17)[8]. Higher education was the cornerstone in development where the workforce was trained to lead the social, economic, political and cultural change, that those HEI were incubators of scientists and technologists who made scientific and technological products, and that the destiny of any nation begun in its classrooms where young people were equipped with knowledge and skills to lead the nation, and right labour needed to be developed to meet industry needs and requirements, but that role was absent in the Arab world, (Issa and Siddiek, 2012:146;149)[19]. Some people might argue that this statement was partly true but too generalized disregarding great strides done in Arabic countries and Oman to localise skills with great success, but others could argue that GCC countries and Oman included continued to live on imported strategic skills, especially in the private sector where localization or Omanisation was just 15-30% in most sectors, despite the Omanisation programme having started in 2000. Surely that was a clear testimony that skills production was definitely not as expected as HEI were still churning out thousands of graduates (and some of those locals remained unemployed, while expatriate labour was still in high demand for the same skills areas (see Appendices 1 and 2). For example the country produces many engineers at different colleges/universities but still imports large numbers in the same areas or disciplines as some local graduates remain unemployed. Bok made the revelation that the major issues of concern to society and academia were:- students spend less time on their coursework than their predecessors and were learning less, employers complained that many graduates they hire were deficient not necessarily in job specific skills but skills such as writing/problem solving/critical thinking, many students came to college poorly prepared for college, universities had more non-tenured lecturers (who inflated grades and caused higher student drop-out rates as per research conducted recently) than tenured professors thus compromising academic quality, and finally substantial cuts in public funding for higher education that had badly affected quality, (Bok, 2017:169-170)[10]. The answer lay in findings in field research why this was happening

as there were many complicated and hidden social and cultural factors at play which outsiders and the public could never imagine or understand. This was the new knowledge this researcher was contributing and closing gaps in knowledge in this respect, for the benefit of academia, society and industry.

This statement was partly true basing on the researcher's own ten years of experience teaching in Oman HEI, but was also open to criticism. There was generalizability and disregard of certain realities on the ground. Oman had produced excellent graduates who had gone to excel in industry and government as well as in further studies locally and in Europe, Asia and in the United States of America up to PhD degrees. It was the English language incompetence and hurdle for about 60-70% of the students that worked against their competence and performance in HEI in Oman rather than a low level of intelligence or commitment, as the medium of instruction was English while their background was Arabic, and not much of English would have been done up to the time they entered HEI. It was quite clear that if someone did not have a good command of English the medium of instruction, then it would be a struggle to master HEI syllabi which would be delivered strictly in English. That English language challenge was a common phenomenon in the rest of the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates). Chinese and Latin American students were having the same nightmares in UK, rest of Europe, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Africans students used to have challenges learning English too in South Africa and pockets of this problem do exist in South Africa up to this day. What the researchers chose to ignore was the fact that Oman had a public as well as a thriving private education system which are doing a lot of good work. Many elitist parents were now sending their children to private schools where the medium of instruction was strictly English ever since, and these students excelled in everything at college and were very articulate in English. Those and many other students from government colleges were really sparkling and fully participated in class discussions and debates, and challenged teachers on many contentious issues, a norm when dealing with competent and ambitious students in any HEI. Therefore the researcher rejects the generalized statement that put all Oman students in one category as strugglers which is not true.

## **2. OMANISATION AND MARKET ORIENTATION (LOCALIZATION OF SKILLS IN OMAN)**

Oman had managed to Omanise (or localize jobs) in government, in local authorities/municipalities and banks very successfully with almost a 100% localization rate, and performance standards were excellent in those institutions. Only expatriate consultants remained to give strategic guidance and advice in most of those

institutions. That was testimony that the Oman HEI had been very successful in meeting national skilled manpower requirements, with some exceptions though. There was nowhere in the world where one found a perfect system. Universities had to be relentless in their pursuit of quality and insist on measured quality which could make them unpopular in some quarters, (Cole, 2009:114)[16]. Good statement but in practice the interest groups were sometimes too powerful for university systems to resist.

Government had since introduced English as a medium of instruction in all public schools starting about three years ago. Before that, Arabic was the medium of instruction from Grade 1 up to Grade 3 and then English would be taught from Grade 4 onwards. The challenge that would be experienced for quite some time in Oman was that the education system value chain was a very long one where benefits of policy changes took too long to be realized. There are and were still many students who went through the old public education system and these would be the inputs for HEI for many years to come with their poor English language challenges, therefore that challenge would remain there for the next twenty years or so until products of the new system start to enter HEI from high schools, who will be very articulate in English. Minimum quality standards would no longer be enough as the bar had to be raised and stakeholders and employers needed to be assured on programme outcome level as well as institutional procedural level, and issues like plagiarism prevention, quality policies and internal moderation needed to be strengthened, (Dowling and Almansoori, 2017:29)[18]. Factors that negatively affected teaching and learning in HEI were always either internal or external in society or the country.

The effects of massification (increasing enrolment numbers for large numbers of students and opening higher education to large segments of society), and austerity on HEI were laid clearly by Altbach when he said the implications and results of this thrust were low salaries for the academic profession and others working in higher education, dropout rates increased and many graduates were deemed unemployable, an overall deterioration in the quality of higher education, poor and often overcrowded facilities, a lack of support staff, outdated or non-existent laboratories, substandard libraries and information technology, insufficient access to Internet-based knowledge, poor quality, denial to some who seek to enter postsecondary education and lastly increasing non-completion rates, (2016:52-54). Exploration of a cross section of academic literature and government reports in Oman confirmed that some of those issues did affect HEI in Oman but not all issues (refer to appendices 1-6). Field research would shed more light on that. The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California surveyed professors on what they considered critical for graduates and they said they considered the following as important for graduates:- critical thinking, skill in writing, preparation for a career, the development

of greater tolerance for other ideas and beliefs, racial understanding and a respect for differences in culture and beliefs, acquiring a breadth of knowledge, ethical awareness, a capacity for moral reasoning, active, knowledgeable citizens, a basic competence in mathematics or numeracy and fostering global awareness, i.e. some knowledge of other cultures and international affairs, (Bok, 2017:22). If one looks at this description one can see that it is educating and training the whole person not just technical education. That also helped eliminate fanaticism and narrow cult based thinking and foster better societal relations.

Oman HEI still faced many challenges in higher education in the following areas:- low English competence of students, low research output, internship management and very high staff turnover, (Yarahmadi and Magd, 2016:5)[31]. In fact internship was just an exception and has not been adopted by almost 95% of HEI, which partly produce theorists and paper tigers for industry, hence the high unemployment rate experienced by graduates in Oman (refer to appendices 1 to 7). In fact a national policy on internship for all HEI was required to stem the production of graduates who are completely divorced from industrial realities. Many countries had to introduce the expensive route of internship after experiencing very disappointing results with paper tigers from HEI who could not fit into the industrial system. Most of the countries have internship of three to eight months, depending on whether a student is doing a certificate, diploma or degree certificate. Graduate compliance with industry and labour market requirements was still a huge challenge in Oman and more needed to be done to correct and achieve strategic fit (refer to appendices 1-6). Why was the HEI system partly producing unsuitable graduates for the labour market when there was an Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and HEI had qualified staff, qualified well screened students, good libraries and good ICT systems? What were the factors militating against quality graduates in HEI? This was a very difficult question to answer and many factors were at play, some of which had already been highlighted above by different researchers.

### **3. THE ROLE, PURPOSE AND VALUE OF A COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY TO THE MODERN STATE**

Carnoy and Levin (1990)[13], pointed to the role of the college as access in social reproduction and the formation of elites, while Slaughter and Rhodes (2004)[26] argued that colleges and universities served a key role in the state efforts to privileged economic development. The case for education was made clear by Best (2011:38), when he said that a child who was not educated risked a lifetime of permanent poverty. He went further to say that lower or no education had serious consequences like lower income, poor health, shorter life expectancy, much greater risks of imprisonment, drug addiction, mental illness and so on.

His conclusion was that education was that education was like a vaccination which helped to ward off potential problems and improved one's chances for a happier, healthier life. The American Council of Education in emphasizing the importance of education to modern society strongly believed that in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nothing was as important as the trained and educated mind, (Axtell, 2016:327)[7].

But some people may argue that educating everyone will deprive companies of lower level cheap workers for blue collar menial jobs, and also promoted unhealthy competition in the labour market thus driving down wages/salaries as has been proven and seen in many countries where it is now normal for graduates to earn much less, to be unemployed or to do menial jobs not expected of graduates. Having created this kind of unbalanced situation does not help the graduates and even governments. The unemployed graduates were much more difficult to manage for governments, and demanded jobs much more than the uneducated who felt that they were created to suffer and deserved to suffer by virtue of their lower or lack of education, and the educated and unemployed, if in large numbers, could be a social time bomb for any country, as confirmed by IMF, UN, World Bank, EU and other global multilateral institutions. The uneducated were also much easier to manipulate and coax than the educated. Governments are also quite keen to have the educated employed to drive economic development and to reduce social cases for government as they earn much more and can look after many family members and donate to the well-being of society.

Christensen and Eyring laid out the foundation of quality higher education when they quoted former Harvard University President, Conant, as saying that it was important to ensure a steady supply of well-prepared students for Harvard and other universities, (2011:125). They were admonishing governments the world over to ensure quality assurance in education right from kindergarten right up to high school to guarantee quality students into colleges so as to ensure progression at the last stage of the education value chain. Their argument was that general education of the great majority of each generation in high school was vastly more important than that of the comparatively small minority who attended colleges. It is undeniable that students were the raw materials of higher education, and if not good then output, graduation rate and overall quality of graduands could not be solved by anyone no matter what. How good were Oman quality assurance measures, and where was the evidence of that? Any system was as good as its final product. Explored research papers on Oman HEI as well as government reports have already reflected a mixed bag, good results as well as a problem situation and an imperfect scenario. The magnitude of the problem and possible solutions would be exposed by field research in due course. Employers complained about the competence of many recent graduates they hired, families throughout the USA had grown increasingly upset over constantly

rising tuition fees, a majority of Americans now believed that colleges care more about the bottom line or profits than they did about their students, (Bok, 2017:1)[10]. Appendices 1-6 quoted underneath tend to agree with this assertion regarding Oman HEI scenario too. There was an undeniable challenge and dilemma which HEI and government had to deal with.

In any country the elementary and high school education system was where most fault lines were identified which would affect HEI value chain negatively, thus creating toxic unpleasant situations which were difficult to solve. Any deficiencies and errors at that crucial level caused dislocations later on which could not be solved fully by HEI. Some children became criminals and nightmares for society after failing to have a role to play in the highly sophisticated modern knowledge society, having been short-changed and betrayed by the school system, if defective and imperfect. Excellent countries had excellent education systems at that early stage, like USA, UK, Norway, China, Lebanon (the best in the Middle East), Germany and Sweden. Oman needed introspection and identify any weaknesses there and correct them, as confirmed in cited appendices. The USA, Japan, China, Germany, France and UK were all battling education reforms and improvements in schools and universities, even though they were the world's largest economies and benchmarks. What more developing countries and young economies like Oman and others?

#### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study has as its main objective to fully unpack teaching and learning issues and market orientation for better service delivery in Oman. The sub-objectives were:-

- a. Understanding status of HEI teaching, learning and market orientation in Oman
- b. Critical analysis of best practice in HEI teaching, learning and market orientation globally
- c. Uncover strategic fit between graduates from Oman HEI and labour market requirements
- d. Major issues affecting faculty and students in HEI teaching and learning in Oman
- e. Advance recommendations to Oman HEI and government for improvements

#### **5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research must answer the following research questions:-

- a. What is the status of HEI teaching, learning and market orientation in Oman?
- b. What is best practice HEI teaching, learning and market orientation globally?
- c. Is there strategic fit between graduates from Oman HEI and labour market requirements?

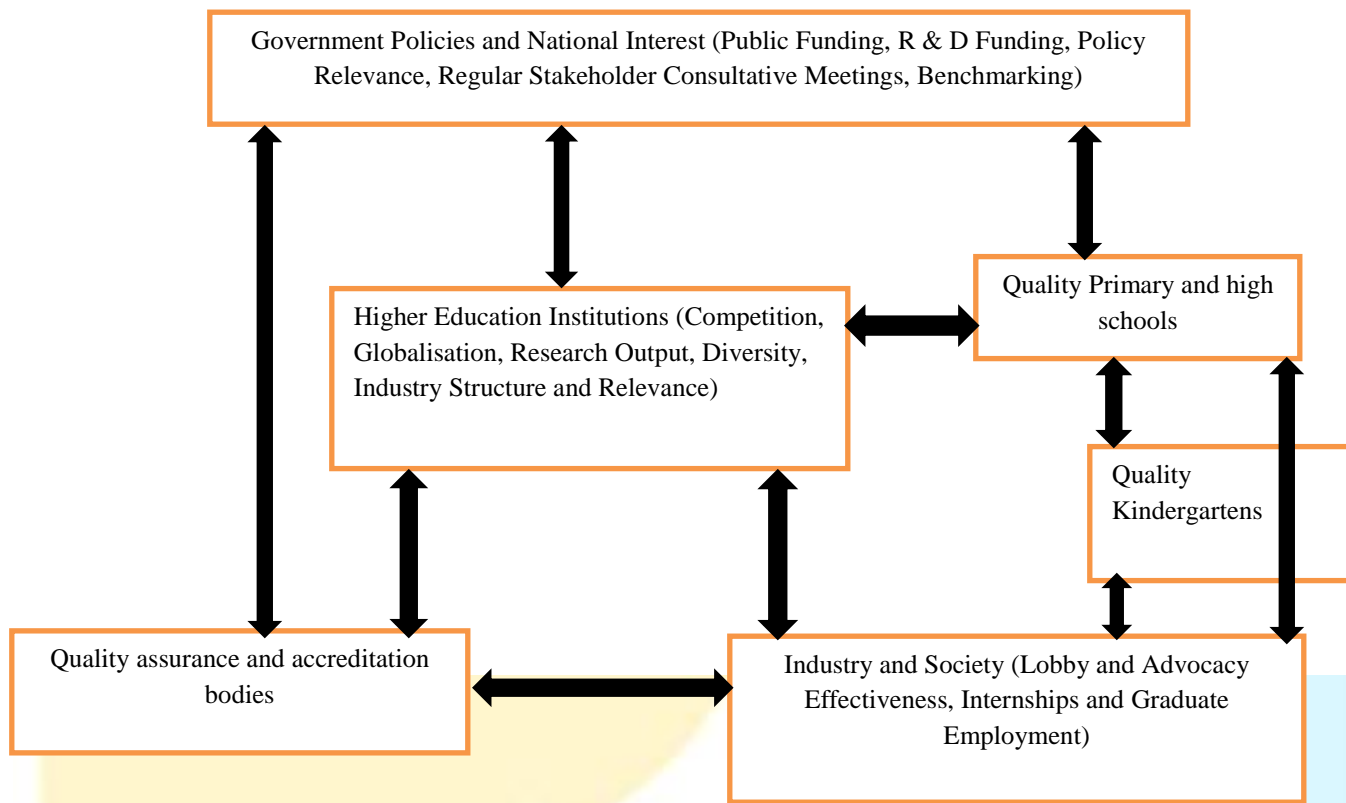
- d. What are the major issues affecting faculty and students in teaching and learning in HEI in Oman?
- e. What recommendations should be advanced to Oman HEI and government for improvements?

#### **6. RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER HEI DYNAMICS**

Research universities must pay the highest salaries than other HEI, they must attract the best students locally and abroad, they must be respected and recognised, must have adequate unquestionable funding, must have good laboratories and infrastructure for research, they must employ the best talent with PhD degrees from around the world, they needed first class ICT facilities and a global network, they needed academic freedom, must have low teaching loads, small classes, time for research, they must offer postgraduate studies up to PhD level, they must have very high research output and publications in peer reviewed journals, they must have many disciplines/departments and are normally very big and complex, most are run by governments and finally professors must enjoy the best middle class salaries and conditions of service in the given country, (Altbach, 2016:180-182)[5]. Universities acted as the producers, wholesalers and retailers of knowledge and were prime instruments of national purpose, (Axtell, 2016: 341)[7]. He was of the opinion that excellent professors benefited undergraduate students in many ways like their love for learning, teacher-scholars were interesting were probably more interesting and better professors and finally a research-oriented faculty was less likely to be the home of intellectual deadwood, while Rosovsky concurred by saying that in hiring and tenure decisions faculty selection based primarily on research performance led to fewer mistakes than choices based hard-to-define teaching ability. (Axtell, 2016:348-349)[7].

Since Oman HEI does have research universities one would like to see to what extent they embraced those characters of a research university, but earlier literature review pointed to huge challenges already, reflected as constraints on service delivery. Things like institutional sponsored research and publishing, sabbatical leave, contact leave, staff and student exchanges, conference attendance, public lectures, consultancy, training and development, joining government think tanks and participating in national debates and discourse helped a lot in developing a research university. Field research would unravel whether Oman HEI were involved in all this and to what extent, given the severe austerity now being implemented in all government entities as well as private HEI and the economy at large. The following matrix gives the factors affecting quality and operations in HEIs.

Figure 1. The complex higher education matrix



Balancing these interest groups was never easy in any country and involved heavy lobby and advocacy and finally consensus. Universities were highly political battle grounds where various interest groups negotiated, scheme, lobbied, demonstrated and otherwise engaged in the competition for preference, recognition, influence and compensation and final decisions were highly influenced by consensus and compromise amongst the interest groups, (Lombardi, 2013:192)[20]. In this scenario who would take the blame when things go wrong, given

realities about human nature, where people blame others for bad things and credit themselves with good things? In the frontline or firing line are the faculty and everybody else behind the scenes. Could that be called fair or objective? That is why some academics say teaching was the most difficult, the most impossible and the most stressful job on earth. The following is the model with variables affecting HEI service delivery:-

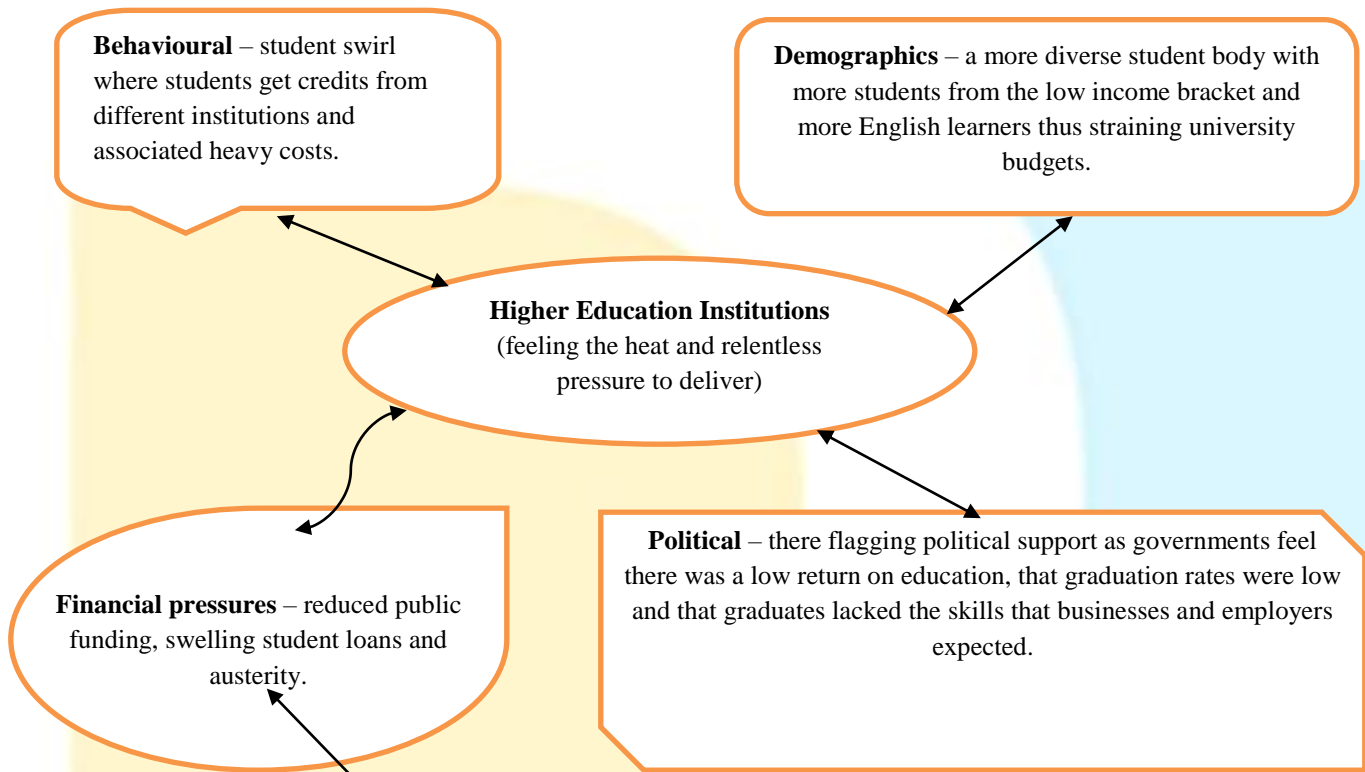


Figure 2: Four Forces Model of Emergent Higher Education

Source: <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-beta/four-emergent-higher-education-models>

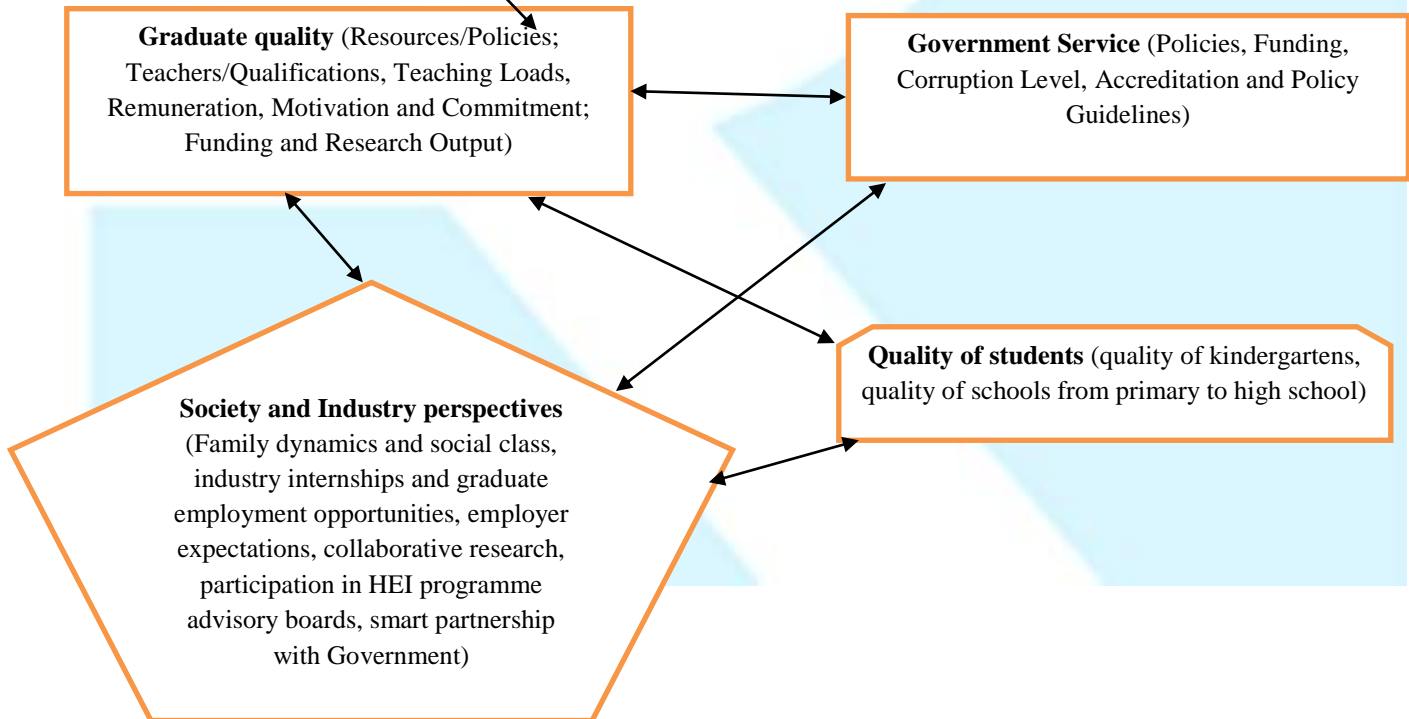


Figure 3: Variables in the research



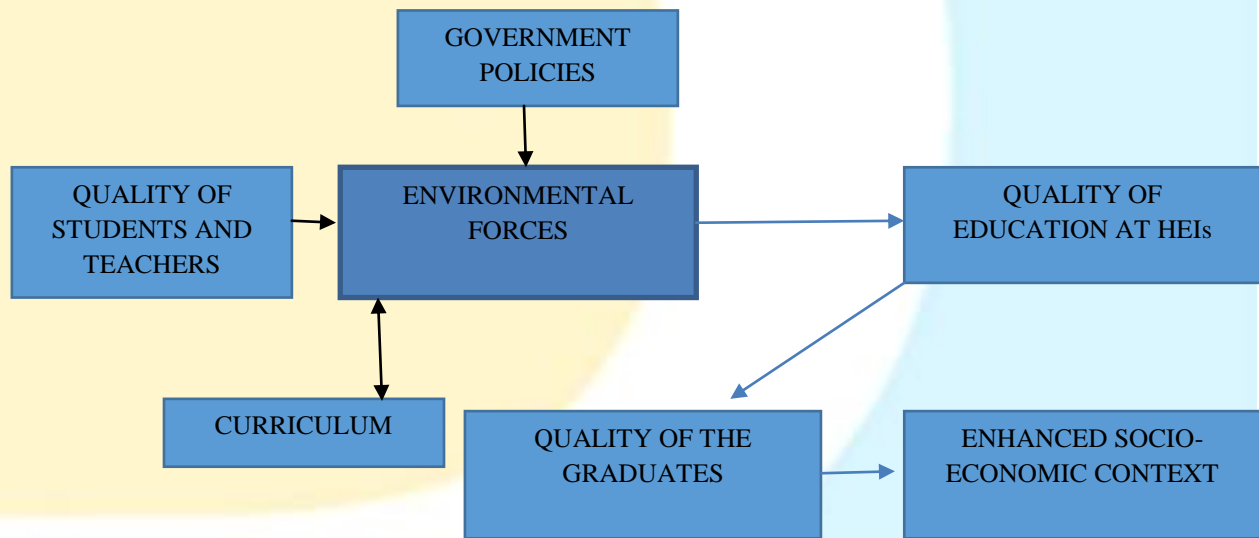
The independent variable is the graduate quality. The dependent variable is the quality of students joining HEI from high schools. The extraneous variables are government policies and funding and societal and industry issues. These variables will be thoroughly analysed and discussed as this paper progresses until finality.

### 7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Any failure to have a correct conceptual framework undermined research by making it murky, weak and could leave you adrift, (Ravitch and Riggan, 2012:4)[25]. A

constraint is anything that negatively affected the operations of HEI and their stakeholders like incompetent students, low graduation rates, poor funding, unemployment for graduates and poor quality graduates. This research sought to identify key success factors for service excellence in teaching and learning in HEI, and what affected HEI strategic fit with the market or market orientation (like unprepared and incompetent students from high schools, teaching loads, regulatory framework, resources, research output, student feedback and concerns, graduate compliance with industry requirements, competition and societal issues).

#### INPUT OUTPUT MODEL IN HEIs



EXOGENOUS VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION
1. ENVIRONMENTAL FORCES:	
a. QUALITY OF STUDENTS: SCHOOLS ATTENDED, DEMOGRAPHICS, WILLINGNESS TO LEARN	
b. TEACHERS' QUALITY: EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, RESEARCH PROFILE, EXPERIENCE	
c. CURRICULUM	
d. GOVERNMENT POLICIES	
ENDOGENOUS VARIABLES	
1. QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT HEIs	
2. QUALITY OF THE GRADUATES	

Figure 4: Input output model in HEIs

## 8. COMPETITION AND NON-ACADEMIC FACILITIES AND ISSUES

Just like the traders in the dot.com boom and those who flipped homes during the housing bubble, college leaders spent the last decade chasing high achieving students, showering them with scholarships to snatch them from competitors, and going deep into debt to build lavish residence halls, recreation facilities, and other amenities that contribute nothing to the actual learning of students – more buildings, more majors, more students, and off course more tuition fees, (Selango, 2013:XII;XXV)[28]. He argued that to keep tuition dollars rolling in to support the whole enterprise, students were not exposed to a rigorous academic experience that would have prepared them for the working world, but instead were treated like customers to be pleased and placated. USA colleges had reached an era of an amenities arms race to build more luxurious and outlandish facilities that had nothing to do with classroom education like residence halls with multi-room suites shared by few students, some with private bedrooms and bathrooms, with wireless internet, microwaves, refrigerators and carpeting, which Frederick Law Olmsted (the USA father of American landscape architecture) said a well-designed campus helped to shape the tastes, inclinations and habits of students, (Selingo, 2013:30-31)[28]. Any academic who has been in Oman and the GCC would agree with some of the expressions here. But others would argue that surely students needed a good life on campus as that facilitated convenient teaching and learning and human dignity. Some students came from very rich families and there was no reason why they had to downgrade their standard of living at campus as that would be traumatizing and dehumanizing.

### 8.1 Global Experiences and Reality

Over the past decade United States colleges increased spending too much on student services, administration and maintenance than on instruction, (Selingo, 2013:27)[28]. Sports undermined the integrity of educational missions and confidence of the public regarding priorities in higher education. A lot of money was spent on sports instead of the core academic functions, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:119)[11]. Athletics scandals could be very damaging for colleges as well as injuries for students during those sports, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:191). Corporatisation effects ranged from increasing class sizes, to loneliness to cutbacks to market-driven research, said Moo University, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:61)[9]. As if that was not enough Nussbaum in, 'Not in Not for Profit: Wy Democracy Needs Humanities,' feared that if the corporatization of higher education continued, nations all over the world would soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:63)[9].

Visiting successful and interesting colleges had immense value to presidents of colleges to learn from their peers and go back and implement best practice, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:112-113)[6]. Excellence in USA universities was driven by similarity of goals and standards, institutional autonomy, intense competition, lots of money or adequate funding, and lastly faculty possessed of specialized expertise governed by guild discipline, and driven by a constant search for excellence, (Axtell, 2016:341-344). Did Oman have adequate funding given severe austerity as a result of low all prices? Former Harvard University president Kerr once said that research universities were powered by money and that those with more money excelled. Giroux put forward a grim picture of modern day campuses when he argued that higher education was corporatized and campuses looked like malls and felt like malls and that most academics now just ran into their departments to grab their mail or attend a meeting and then left as quickly as they could, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:74)[9]. They mourned that much discussion had shifted to email or web forums and when meetings were called people were but not there, they said quoting Turkle, and that the workplace was now one of demoralization, overwork and competition. Academics should stop abusing themselves with overwork as it does not help students learn and ruined academics' health and caused academics to break down, and most importantly made them to hate students, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:41)[9]. Good as it may look this statement ignores the fact that academics have no control on heavy teaching loads which are imposed on them by employers on a take or leave basis, whether this is public or private college. This was not a secret and is public knowledge for all in academia the world over. The changes to academic labour had increased the expectations of what it meant to be a productive scholar, while simultaneously increasing class sizes and expanding academics job descriptions where faculty were caught in a paradox because of lack of time and space, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:54-55)[9]. Modern colleges, especially private ones, had created a paradox where academics were caught between a hard rock and a hard surface – time constraints, work life balance, huge class sizes, appeasement, fund raising, research and publishing, community service, pleasing students, society and their employers as well as being acceptable to crude and no nonsense accreditation agencies and auditors/external examiners. American, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabian academics were quoted in this paper as saying that this was the most difficult part for academics and the reason for stress and despondence as well as termination of contracts or employment dismissal. They said running battles with these constituencies never ended and were badly traumatizing. The Oman situation could be revealed in field research.

## 8.2 Vision, Mission and Contradictory Dynamics on Campus

Vision, mission, dress code, good premises, reform and change management, good housekeeping, beautiful premises, refurbishing buildings and fundraising could do a lot of good for an institution to gain student and stakeholder confidence, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:109)[6]. Male students who excel in high-profile sports like soccer and baseball are less likely to finish their studies as their time and focus is diverted to sports, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:194)[6]. American higher education still commanded and led the world having such elite and prestigious institutions like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Berkeley, Stanford, Amherst, Williams and a few dozen other household brands, (Selingo, 2013:XVII)[28]. It was important to know why these institutions led the world for purposes of benchmarking. It was commonplace in higher education that good research supported good teaching, (Thorp and Goldstein, 2010:97)[30]. Here was a contradiction. How much research could be done in the midst of massification, large class sizes, temporary contracts, underfunding and austerity? Hard choices were required by corporatized colleges.

On campus tours, colleges emphasize the bells and whistles: the fancy dorms, climbing walls, and technology-filled classrooms but smart students should focus their attention on the quality of teaching, the portability of their credits, and the value a degree or other credential would provide them in the job market, (Selingo, 2013:XXVI). That was well said but the corporatized academic world in the USA and most of the rest of the world was partly a world of manipulation, truths and half-truths, exploitation and marketing strategy, especially for private colleges as they hunted for cash and customers at any cost. There were many excellent private colleges which had made immense contributions to their communities no doubt. Higher education was now a big business generating billions for the the USA and it had become the linchpin in the economies of American metropolitan areas that were pulling away from the rest of the country, (Selingo, 2013:3-4)[28].

Would it not be sensible for Oman to pursue the academic city concept and create more competition, thereby improving the higher education market, and have the market weed out incompetent players through competition as is the case in UAE? That would be a smart way but required careful formulation of policies and policing mechanisms to avoid unfair competition, abuse and manipulation of society. Failing colleges can leave a trail of societal disaster and injuries as they collapse as seen in the USA many times as well as in Dubai in 2008-2010. Overproduction of certain skills categories while shortages exist in other areas had already been cited by Oman government. This was failure to achieve market orientation in HEI. In transitioning, emerging and developing countries, resources for higher education, and

indeed higher educational systems themselves, remained inadequate, (Alon and McIntyre, 2013:27).

American colleges seemed to be in every business but education: the entertainment business, the housing business, the restaurant business, the recreation business, and on some campuses they operate what were essentially professional sports franchises and were acting like Fortune 500 companies; salaries had ballooned and board members were not selected for their knowledge of higher education but for their corporate ties and colleges now viewed students as customers and marketed their degree programmes as products, (Selingo, 2013:5). That was a global phenomenon and Oman was no exception. How could that be reversed or how could standards be maintained as ultimately government were concerned about academic standards and suitability of graduates to labour market requirements, regardless of who produced the graduate – public or private institution? It was all about running a thriving national economy.

Investigations in the USA by undercover Government Accountability Office (GAO), revealed that private colleges had often lured students through high-pressure and deceptive practices, and sometimes outright fraud, and out of fifteen colleges investigated thirteen provided deceptive information to applicants, implying guaranteed jobs for their graduates or inflated earnings for those employed in the fields for which they offered training, (Mettler, 2014:35)[22]. The biggest sin committed by universities was homogeneity (having the same degrees), which made competition so difficult and getting students even more difficult, (McGee, 2015:112). He argued that if degrees were differentiated that would lead to the automatic advantages of monopoly or monopolistic competition which would shield colleges from cut throat competition. There was also the risk of unemployment as job market was saturated by same degree graduates from too many colleges. Who should decide the number of programmes and colleges in each country for equilibrium - government or the market? That was a very difficult question to answer. In the USA it was the market rather than government hence better market orientation and balance

## 8.3 The Globalization of Higher Education

Countries hosted international students for many reasons like to internationalise their campuses, to earn income from international students, the need to fill empty seats and the desire to attract top-quality students, (Altbach, 2016:9)[5]. James Altucher the author of, 'Be the Luckiest Person Alive,' said he met students who struggled who struggled with their studies in college or their finances, or both and others who did not know why they were in college, other than that their parents wanted them there, (Selingo, 2013:161). He was surprised to learn that some parents sent their children to college because there was nowhere to put them and treated college as a convenient, albeit expensive warehouse. The big question was how teachers could motivate the latter

group which did not want college in the first place, and did not even know why they were in college? Were teachers not being blamed for nothing when there were other factors beyond their control? Degree completion was heavily affected by class with students from poor families having higher dropout rates than those from rich families, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:38-40). The two easiest ways to increase graduation rates were to turn away less qualified students and to lower graduation standards but ensuring that graduated students met industry requirements fully, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:137)[11]. Although the quality of academics was what mattered most, students were spending more time climbing walls, patronizing food courts and movie theaters, which offered plenty of alternatives to studying, and spending very little time on studying, (Selingo, 2013:34). He argued that students spent more than half of their time per week on socializing and recreation, distractions to education and studying which the colleges readily provided.

Berg and Seeber, (2016:53)[9], quoting Gnsberg argued that today's captains of erudition saw he university as the equivalent of a firm manufacturing goods and providing services whose main products happened to be various forms of knowledge rather than automobiles, computers, or widgets, (page 168). He went further and said that the quantifying and profit tagging was wrong as it did not recognize the scholarly activities recognized, promoted and rewarded at universities. It is very true that academia had a large element of community and national service through research. This tends to be ignored by many non-academics. The debate was still raging on. It was very difficult to get and retain leading academics. Axtell enunciated the difficulties when he said that the brightest and most productive researchers, especially scientists, cost more to hire in the global competitive market-place, and they demanded the best in labs, libraries, equipment, low teaching loads, frequent sabbaticals, graduate or postdoctoral assistants, administrative support, high powered colleagues for simulation/collaboration/prestige and even convenient parking spots, besides demanding huge salaries and benefits, and preventing poaching of same by other institutions was very expensive too, (Axtell, 2016:342)[7]. Does Oman give these kinds of benefits and facilities? Why was it that Oman was losing a lot of academics to UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar? The researcher's experience in Oman confirms that Oman lagged behind its GCC members in salaries and benefits but had excellent facilities and academic infrastructure and was well resourced.

Two of the USA's pre-eminent academics proffered that students joined colleges for good and weird reasons some of which were a good life and good job/job security, a time of freedom, an opportunity to make friends for a life time, a chance to explore ideas, meet different kinds of people, ingest the world in new ways, a chance for party, drink, ingest assorted drugs and indulge in women and

men (obviously not the case in Oman and the GCC because of strict Sharia law and the Islamic religion). The authors argued that kids from poor backgrounds found it difficult to get places at colleges because of lack of required fees and subsistence money, poor SAT scores caused by unsupportive parents, divorces and broken families, brawling families, poverty, poor accommodation/facilities, deprivation, lack of access to computers/internet and lack of books at home, attending poor rated schools, a poor achievement and education culture at home and social upheaval, drug peddling, getting too involved with girls and boys, poor degree completion chances/rates, among many evils, (Clawson and Page, 2011:13; 31-36). That was corroborate by many researchers in this paper too and elsewhere. If this was the case and reality then why were academics and colleges always held responsible for students' failure and failure to complete degrees/diplomas when most causal factors were actually outside colleges and were found in families, communities and government policies. Even remedial and mitigating measures adopted by colleges had their limitations too.

The USA's elite universities' secrets of success, which puzzle the world, were:-

- There was strict meritocracy in student and staff recruitment, reflection of national ethos and culture plus a rich mix of more than 3000 public and private HEI;
- Academic diversity in terms of funding from public and private, federal, state, municipal, corporate, entrepreneurial and philanthropic sources;
- There was a good balance between teaching and research;
- Academic departments and faculties or schools were discipline based and highly specialized to allow for focus and synergies and highly researched tenure track professors dominate the system rather than adjunct and temporary faculty;
- There was intense competition for faculty and academic talent which improves their earnings and conditions;
- University building is owed to academe's pursuit of and receptivity to talented foreign students, some of whom get USA citizenship after completing their studies, especially PhDs and hard sciences and the USA has always welcomed persecuted top professors from the whole world since time immemorial, which has highly enriched USA universities;
- There is unquestionable academic freedom for faculty and students alike which one rarely finds in other countries, other than Western countries. Academics could teach, research and publish on any topic without restraint or sanctions or fear (except restricted highly sensitive state security and military issues), a very rare situation globally.
- American research universities were especially strong because they were governed similarly and in concert

- with their strong faculties without any undue pressure from political authority and economic power;
- American research universities had a long tradition of offering undergraduates a broad liberal education for the whole person, not just technical competence thus inculcating a passion for intellectual inquiry;
  - USA universities have the most talented faculty as well as competing for the best diverse talented students from a large international pool, not just locals, and some of these get scholarships;
  - USA universities are deeply committed to public service or national service and do engage industry, government and society in win-win collaborative arrangements and synergies in research, training, consultancy, SME development and many other areas;
  - American universities had generally attractive locations, were well resourced and funded, had evocative architecture and inspirational beautiful campuses, with some outside congested cities, and most had world class residential facilities, and the USA's huge geographical size covered all temperatures and seasons and exceptional variety for local and international students and faculty, (Axtell, 2016:364-372)[7].

Those factors made the USA exceptional and could not be easily replicated by other countries. Its cities were clean, smart, high-tech and well maintained thus giving quality of life.

## 9. RESEARCH METHOD

A research design was the comprehensive plan for data collection in an empirical research project, and design's quality was measured by checking internal validity, external validity, construct validity and statistical conclusion validity, where applicable, (Bhattacharjee, 2012:35-37). This is qualitative research. The research method used in this research was observation which was suitable as the researcher has worked in four colleges in Oman as well as visiting many others over the last ten years, and has observed many dynamics in HEI. Face to face interviews were done as main research method, with respondents across Oman's rich higher education industry covering three colleges, with two respondents from each institution as well as academics who double as parents with children in HEI. The total number of interviewees was ten, five females and five males for gender balance, checks and balances. The researcher checked and verified the knowledge, experience and expertise of respondents before selecting them. In interviews the key to getting good data was to ask good questions, which should be understood and in familiar language, and in words that reflected the respondent's word view, (Merriam, 2009:95)[21]. Only those with knowledge in higher education were selected. Questions were checked by academic experts before being administered on

respondents to check correctness, objectivity and relevancy to the research topic. Respondents voluntarily participated in the research and their anonymity was assured and respected. Some issues were so touching and emotional and interviews went beyond original allocated time or had to be rescheduled for further discussions as too many issues came to the surface, and those had multifaceted dimensions and many causal factors deep rooted in Oman social dynamics. Watertight reliability and validity measures were employed like ensuring a good undisturbed venue where there were no interruptions and reading back recordings to respondents before closing the interviews to avoid mistakes in answers. The researcher took notes during the interviews and quickly did analysis immediately after the interviews in line with accepted international practice in qualitative interviews.

## 10. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from research were a mixed bag and included many surprises and unknown issues, which even the researcher who has been in Oman since 2008 was surprised about. The face to face interviews unearthed many surprises and highly emotional issues as expressed by interviewees. The biggest problem in the Arab world was that there was reduced funding for higher education and research, as well as high teaching loads and very poor graduate compliance with industry requirements, (Abedalhakeem and Ahmed, 2012:148-150)[1]. This was also confirmed in Oman Government reports cited before.

### 10.1 Oman Social and Societal Issues Affecting College Students

It would be very difficult to discuss HEI student issues, student drop-outs at college, their challenges/interactions at colleges, employment and unemployment without understanding the social dynamics around those issues in detail as Oman, like other GCC Arabic/Islamic countries, had many unique cultural traits and dynamics which affected employment and unemployment and college attendance which may not be found elsewhere in the world. The researcher did in-depth face to face interviews with a wide cross section of academics and administrative staff at different Oman HEI to find out the factors which affected students on campus as well as after graduation in terms of employment uptake and job preference. Research output was still very low in Oman because of high teaching loads, insufficient funding, inadequate library resources, less support, poor development, focusing on teaching and poor research incentives, (Alrence, Ronald and Percia, 2017:13)[4]. The challenge in American education was that the public expected universities to successfully graduate all students who entered universities despite the public school systems finding difficulty in producing college-ready graduates, (Lombardi, 2013:26)[20]. If Appendices 1 to 6 were anything to go by, it becomes clear Oman faced the same scenario and

challenges. The problem with human nature is that we all looked for third parties to blame for a scenario, which is the case with parents, students and sections of society. The practice in academics of saying the painful truth right in the face created many backlashes and enemies for academics, with the unlucky ones losing their jobs, especially expatriates in many countries.

### 10.2 General Societal Issues

About 10% of women graduates remained at home and would never work all their lives as their families were against female employment as this was considered unacceptable from a religious point of view by some Oman people, for women to be working away from home and mixing with strangers and unknown men. Managers and academics from other countries would obviously not know this and may find themselves in a social minefield. This is unemployment by choice not that there are no jobs.

### 10.3 New Working Class Culture Emerges in Oman and the GCC

The current modern Oman society had many young men who would never marry a woman who does not have a certificate, diploma or degree (60-90%). The men prefer working women with a financial contribution to family income, or even if they may not work they believed educated women were considered assets as they had positive influence on the children education wise. That desire for educated women was putting a lot of pressure on women to get some credential in order to get married by the right person. In fact almost all boys/men from the middle/working classes had this orientation (80-90%), with a few exceptions. The women in turn would be pressuring academics to pass them so that they could be able to get a suitable suitor and future husband. But academics would always do assessments based on assessment policy, objectivity and fairness, but this pressure is definitely a reality for HEI teachers in Oman and the GCC. Humans were attracted to partners like them in age, religion, ethnicity, class, hobbies and education, and marriage was now a conscious on-campus gold-digging exercise as men seek spouses with a high salary and vice-versa, and scholars were well aware of high-income men increasingly matching with high income women, (Caplan, 2018:155-156)[12]. Therefore this was not a phenomenon in Oman only but a global phenomenon where people protect their standard of living and social class even in marriage. This scenario had ripple effects on societies and HEI were not spared too.

## 11. WHAT DO PARENTS WORRY ABOUT FOR THEIR CHILDREN IN HEI?

The researcher asked parents and HEI administrators what parents really worried about in terms of their students in college and their answers follow:-

- Children not being serious about their studies;

- Worries about courses like Mathematics whether their children would pass them;
- They parents came to college to check whether their children were attending classes regularly as some could bunk classes;
- They worried about the academic performance of their children;
- They worried about the behavior of their children away from the prying eyes of parents;
- Some students had a history of problems in previous schools and parents wanted to check whether there was change in behavior;
- Some students had no interest in studies;

## 12. OTHER ISSUES AFFECTING STUDENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HEI

- Some parents forced their children to do certain diploma/degree specialisations or majors which the students did not want or were incompetent to master. That always caused huge problems. 50-60% of parents were doing this with negative consequences naturally;
- Some primary and secondary schools did not have comprehensive up to date syllabuses and students did not get required skills, challenges, socialization and preparation for college;
- Sometimes government scholarships were only available in areas or disciplines students did not like but just took them as the alternative would be to select their own choice and finance their studies on their own, an uphill dreaded task for many families, given the cost of HEI (e.g. a four year degree costs tuition fees of US\$28600-30000, depending on college), plus other ancillary charges, then accommodation. It must be remembered that the Oman Government had its own priority areas for scholarships based on strategic value to the national economy and the need for localization of skills called Omanisation, which sought to replace expatriates with locals as much as possible, thereby reducing foreign remittances. Students needed financial security to focus on their studies, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:86)[11].
- Muscat was very expensive to live in and many students struggled to survive there;
- Transport difficulties for boys sometimes drove some to leave college (girls were normally provided with transport by colleges or campus residential accommodation);
- Arabic language which was the medium of instruction in primary and high schools in Oman, created huge challenges for students to transition to college where the medium of instruction was strictly English. Many of them had a low level English competence which really traumatizes them in

learning and understanding lectures taught by mostly expatriate lecturers, as well as understanding assignments, examinations and graduation projects. This was a huge problem in Oman HEI which will not go away until kindergarten, primary and high schools changed and started teaching in English as medium of instruction in place of Arabic right from kindergarten.

- In schools students are taught by Oman Arabic teachers in Arabic but in college they have to be taught by mostly expatriate teachers who teach in English and their accent is problematic for many who cannot understand them. Many get frustrated badly and some leave college for that reason alone. In most colleges in Oman 90% of teachers were expatriates and only 10% were Omanis. It was generally felt that Omani teachers were more accommodating and paternalistic while expatriates were hard core systematic people who simply follow standard international principles of pedagogics in HEI. With the current high teaching loads in many colleges these days, the personal care for individual students diminishes substantially as colleges chase numbers to make money and profits.
- Schools were not preparing students at the right level and with the real challenging syllabus and activities, so when they came to colleges the transition was very tough as there would be a huge gap in pitching, standards and expectations. That resulted in shock and frustration on the part of some students who could not cope. One study said the Omani syllabus at schools was last revised in 2006 and was out of date with the latest developments in primary and high school education and best practice;
- Students from private schools had a very good international education and grounding and were competent and fluent in English language as well as being at par with international standards and did not have any problems transitioning into colleges;
- Families and schools were not preparing students for college responsibilities fully. Many parents were too paternalistic and provided everything to the extent that some students could not even wash their own clothes and manage their social lives without their parents. The biggest issues in higher education in the USA were low completion rates, affordability, poor academic leadership, difficult economic environment, reduced government funding, the desire by private colleges for large enrollments, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:61-63)[11]. When one looks at Oman more or less the same issues affect HEI too.
- Some boys lived in overcrowded hostels that they rent in Muscat, and in some cases 4 to six boys would stay in one room. That compromised quality of life, confidentiality and peace of mind, and even disturbed studies. One could imagine the dynamics where you have six young boys in one room. Some got

frustrated and left college going back to their homes or villages where they enjoyed spacious accommodation. It was worse with those from average and working class families used to a much better life. Sometimes the scholarship needed topping up because of the high cost of living in Muscat, which was difficult for some parents and could result I some student drop-outs from colleges, though not high.

- Boys are crowded in hostels that they rent in Muscat, and in some cases seven boys would stay in one room. That compromises quality of life, confidentiality and peace of mind, and even disturbed studies. One can imagine the dynamics where you have seven young boys in one room. Some get frustrated and leave college going back to their homes or villages. It is worse with those from average and working class families.

### 13. REASONS WHY SOME STUDENTS HAD NO INTEREST IN COLLEGES/UNIVERSITY YET WERE REGISTERED

- Working part-time jobs and there was divided attention and they will be tired and exhausted when they come for classes in the evening. Some will be dozing in the classes and cannot focus and concentrate;
- Sheer laziness;
- Forced by parents to do programmes that they do not want or have no interest in or were incompetent to do (parents who force their children to do certain programmes against their wish were 60% of total enrolments). Sometimes this would be a result of having seen someone in the extended family or village who did very well after graduating with that diploma/degree;
- Government scholarships were allocated on a quota basis for different colleges and for certain majors or specialisations only (they were not open ended). 90% of students said they ended up doing diplomas and degrees which they do not want simply because the government scholarship was in the major, so their choice would be very limited. Opting for a major not listed by government meant they had to pay for themselves, which was a very difficult task, given the high prohibitive fees in private colleges in Oman, as elsewhere. In government colleges you meet the minimum grade for entry, and get a scholarship, or no entry at all as paying for yourself was not allowed (or there was no provision for it in their statutes). Those students would not be having an interest in their studies as it was something not of their choice but done to get into college on a government ticket, plus as an entry to the professions and industry jobs. Students faced many challenges like high tuition fees, high student loan debt, failure to repay loans for

education and weak employment prospects for graduates, (Mettler, 2014:189)[22].

#### 14. WHAT ADMINISTRATORS AND ACADEMICS SAY AFFECTS STUDENTS IN HEI

HEI administrators at different colleges highlighted the following as issues affecting college students:-

- Some students never bother to read and understand college policies even though they were widely distributed to them. They simply do not read them but would rather read lecture notes and books where they get marks and grades. When they breach certain policies and were penalised they would profess ignorance and surprise of those policies;
- Some students felt that college policies were too strict and some left college for that reason alone, although a very small percentage;
- Programme regulations and study duration limits were not known by some students (4 years for diploma and 8 years for degree). Once they received an sms from the college saying they had reached the 4 or 8 year programme limit and could not continue, some would immediately go home and stop coming to college, yet that could be negotiated with good reasons and continue studies;
- The culture of independent study was still very low in Oman as students wanted hand holding most of the time;
- Language issues frustrated many students as they could not converse and write in English at this advanced level and got frustrated or helpless, and some left college;
- Plagiarism regulations and penalties were a big bother for many students, and some left college for that reason alone after failing due to plagiarism penalties;
- Parents were forcing students to take a specialization that they did not want (50-60% of parents), and that failed some students who did not have the competence, while some had no interest and ended up leaving college;

#### 15. WHY STUDENTS WITHDREW OR DROPPED FROM HEI

The following were some of the major reasons why students left college before graduation:-

- If someone was on government scholarship and repeated the same module or course three times, the third time one pays for himself/herself fully and some students may not have the expensive fees in private colleges;
- Examination malpractice or cheating where results were nullified by college;

- The cost of the college tuition and subsistence for self-paying students, may be too high and unaffordable;
- Some students get jobs and drop out of college, especially lucrative government jobs like police and army jobs (favourites), or any government job or jobs in lucrative multinationals;
- Marriage was another factor, especially for girls;
- Psychological problems and sickness (like mental case or similar challenges);
- Rude teachers (but very rare);
- Some students felt that some teachers did not understand the students, especially expatriate teachers;
- Some students felt there was no pastoral support and students felt lost and abandoned and left college;
- Failure to cope with the rigours of a programme;
- Not attending classes and they reach maximum allowable absence and were terminated;
- Major social problems and upheavals in family;
- Lack of support from family (especially financial);
- Major social problems and upheavals in family;
- Lack of support from family (especially financial);
- Death in the family which destabilizes social stability, and one may be required back home to look after the family.

#### 16. JOBS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Question: How many Oman graduates would accept or reject private sector jobs and why?

##### GIRLS

Out of 100 girls 70% would accept the private sector jobs while 30% would refuse them. **The main reasons for acceptance were:-**

- Fixed income and independence;
- Fast career growth and plenty of training and development programmes;
- Less bureaucracy and flexibility;
- Good attention and recognition;
- Less favouritism and cronyism (Wasta in Arabic);
- Sometimes higher salaries in multinationals and better benefits;
- A chance for overseas training and experience.

**The reasons for the 30% rejection were:-**

- Too much pressure at work;
- Job timings or work schedules not favourable;
- Working hours too long and strenuous;
- Odd working hours where one has to be away from family and friends (some jobs required weekend working like hotels, hospitals and restaurants);
- Shift work may be required;
- Forced overtime;
- Too many foreigners in-charge, supervising and commanding Omanis/nationals in their own country (irritating they said).

##### BOYS/MEN



Out of 100 boys/men 90% would accept the private sector jobs while 10% would refuse them. **The main reasons for acceptance were:-**

- Fixed income and independence;
- Fast career growth and plenty of training and development programmes;
- Less bureaucracy and flexibility;
- Good attention and recognition;
- Less favouritism and cronyism (Wasta in Arabic);
- Sometimes higher salaries in multinationals and better benefits;
- A chance for overseas training and experience.

**The reasons for the 10% rejection were:-**

- Too much pressure at work;
- Job timings or work schedules not favourable;
- Working hours too long and strenuous;
- Odd working hours where one has to be away from family and friends (some jobs required weekend working like hotels, hospitals and restaurants);
- Shift work may be required;
- Forced overtime;
- Too many foreigners in-charge, supervising and commanding Omanis/nationals in their own country (it was irritating, they said).

## 17. JOBS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR OR GOVERNMENT

**Question:** How many Oman graduates would accept or reject public sector or government jobs and why?

### GIRLS

Out of each 100 girls 90% would accept the public sector jobs while 10% would refuse them. The main reasons for acceptance were:-

- Less working hours;
- No shift work;
- Working with one's kith and kin as public sector was dominated by Omanis;
- Using one's own language i.e. Arabic, and strict observance of religious code of conduct;
- Clear separation of the sexes;
- Fixed income and independence;
- Job security and shielded from the vagaries of the economy like the recession;
- Career growth and training and development programmes;
- Flexibility and full understanding of cultural requirements;
- Sometimes higher salaries and better benefits than some private firms;
- Scholarships and advancement.

The reasons for job rejection were:-

- Career advancement was slow
- Learning, training and development was slow and less;
- Wasta (cronyism and favouritism) was rife and where sometimes friends and relatives advanced and

unknowns were displaced and disadvantaged (it also happens in the private sector but was less);

- The ambitious may be frustrated by the slow pace of things and lack of recognition;
- Bureaucracy and red-tape.

### BOYS/MEN

Out of 100 boys/men 60% would accept the public sector jobs while 40% would refuse them.

The main reasons for acceptance were:-

- Less working hours;
- No shift work;
- Working with one's kith and kin as public sector was dominated by Omanis;
- Using one's own language i.e. Arabic, and strict observance of religious code of conduct;
- Clear separation of the sexes;
- Fixed income and independence;
- Job security and shielded from the vagaries of the economy like the recession;
- Career growth and training and development programmes;
- Flexibility and full understanding of cultural requirements;
- Sometimes higher salaries and better benefits than some private firms;
- Scholarships and advancement.

The reasons for job rejection were:-

- Career advancement was slow
- Learning, training and development was slow and less;
- Wasta (cronyism and favouritism) was rife and where sometimes friends and relatives advanced and unknowns were displaced and disadvantaged (it also happens in the private sector but was less);
- The ambitious may be frustrated by the slow pace of things and lack of recognition;
- Bureaucracy and red-tape.

## 18. CONCLUSION, SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploring and scouring these findings one could see a few recurring and solid conclusions about Oman HEI. It was quite clear that Oman had come a long way and built respectable HEI, but like other developing countries, improvements were always necessary to consolidate the system based on big and leading players in the Western world and Asia. The learning college would reflect that student learning and assessment of that earning were central to the mission of the college, its philosophy, its values, and the identity of the institution, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:20)[6].

Major points raised about student learning, assessment and what affected students' lives on campus were:- there was a huge problem of graduate compatibility with

industry requirements as per Ministry of Higher Education report (only 47% of graduates got jobs and 53% struggled to get jobs); students wanted a decent life almost as good as what they experienced at home and this was sometimes not the case due to budgetary limitations thus causing frustrations; some schools in Oman were not preparing students for the rigours of college education thus creating huge problems for HEI to graduate some students while some would drop out for this reason; there were students who were simply forced into colleges by parents and peer pressure who had no interest in college education; English was one of the major hurdles for many students in Oman as they were taught in Arabic in high school with very little English and could not cope with English as main medium of instruction in colleges which frustrated some to leave college or fail; about 50-60% of parents forced their children to do a major or specialization which they did not want or had no interest in or had no capacity for and that resulted in failure or drop outs; some students simply registered for programmes they did not want just to get a government scholarship (as government scholarships covered few programmes), to avoid paying fees and that also drove many to fail or drop out due to lack of interest or incompetence; in USA massification or mass enrollments and corporatization of HEI was affecting quality as faculty were overloaded/overworked and could not give personalized attention to each and every student; graduated students were too selective on jobs and rejected some jobs in the private sector where there were long working hours, working odd hours and weekends, and where the pressure was too much and salaries and benefits low; many graduates preferred government jobs for job security and better benefits than the private sector; MNC jobs were also preferred due to higher salaries, better training and faster career progression; many reasons for college drop outs were rooted in family and societal issues, finance and many issues outside academia where colleges could do very little or nothing, and finally research support and research output was quite low in Oman when compared with the region and leading economies in the world. The shackles of NO Objections Certificates (NOCs) restricting and preventing the movement of labour from one employer to the next in Oman needed to be repealed and removed to match Oman's GCC partners and promote healthy competition. Free movement of labour has always been the hallmark of American economic policy as well as all other progressive world economies. The other issue highlighted in findings was the issue of favouritism/cronyism in employment (called Wasta in Arabic), where some managers and officers employed their relatives and friends at the expense of well deserving better candidates. It also equally affected promotions and career development. This was quite common in the GCC countries, including Oman and was the same in many countries globally. That raises a lot of questions about the truth and objectivity of the unemployment and suitability of graduates for the labour

market debate. If some recruitment officers used favouritism/cronyism in employment, were they not the causers of future performance problems by sidelining better more suitable candidates, and employing the unsuitable, who would naturally have poor performance as they were not suitable in the first place? This was not a problem for HEI but biased recruitment practices. More research could educate people on the extend and effects of wrong recruitments driven by cronyism/favouritism and genuine cases where candidates were simply not well prepared by the HEI, where HEI had to take corrective actions together with other HEI stakeholders. Having solid diverse recruitment committees from different departments could help minimize or eliminate this practice and was already used by many organisations in Oman with good results. But the effects of Wasta were real and could not be ignored and affected recruitment decisions.

Many of the issues raised in field research and literature review were educative and could help all HEI stakeholders have a relook at areas needing a revisit and strengthening. Most American universities, except the research universities, had large class sizes, course loads were heavy, student selectivity was low and time and resources were scarce, (Labaree, 2017:173). The same author argued that elite successful HEI had low teaching loads, selective admissions and ample support for research. This was the challenge in Oman where higher teaching loads were the norm except at government HEI and a few private HEI. Students faced many challenges nowadays like:- high tuition fees, high student loan debt, failure to repay loans for education, weak employment prospects for graduates, being taught by contract and temporary faculty with no job security, and there was less support for students which was now affecting graduation rates downwards, (Mettler, 2014:189)[22].

Education could only be improved through smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, longer school years, more computers in classrooms and free choice for programmes by students and their parents, (Best, 2011:42-43). The HEI sector was a highly contentious multi-sectoral industry with interest groups right across society as a whole – employers wanted good graduates who deliver for them to be efficient, profitable and competitive; parents wanted the best HEI and guaranteed jobs for their offspring and so did the students themselves; colleges wanted numbers, reputation and image, meeting turnover/profit targets for the private HEI, meeting national skilled manpower goals and understanding national ethos for public HEI, meeting accreditation and regulatory requirements as well as societal expectations, making a contribution and societal responsibility (CSR), contributing to credible research nationally and having a respectable alumni who can help fund the college and in other respects. Oman needed to establish Academic and Medical Cities and internationalise its HEI just as was the case in UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as the rest of the world, where students and faculty are recruited

globally and HEI aimed at getting the best students and faculty from any part of the world. That is unfinished business in Oman. Academic and Medical cities would create thousands of jobs with a multiplier effect thus helping government solve the unemployment problem. The USA has always used that strategy in rapid job creation and economic development.

In light of the above it was quite obvious that government needed to revise its narrow programme coverage on scholarships and widen the width and breadth of the new emerging modern economy into new innovative programmes. Colleges needed to be futuristic and guide nation in introducing futuristic programs that create jobs and national wealth in the above and other areas rather than saturation and oversupply in same areas or disciplines, while shortages persist in other areas. Competition was too crude for universities that they had to use advanced marketing strategies to get students, research funding, collaborative arrangements with industry, graduate employment, to get the ear of government and to protect themselves, (Christensen and Eyring, 2011:94)[14]. The higher education industry was a world of contradictions and so many tussles with too many interest groups. As Oman proceeded with the noble goal of Omanisation (localization of jobs and skills), it needed to be very careful to treat the higher education sector just like other industries or sectors. This was a very delicate industry requiring decades of experience working in HEI as well as painful masters and PhD degrees and painstaking research to run HEI effectively. HEI were as delicate as a nuclear power station if not more. Localisation had to be done with great care and scrutiny and get locals to work with great professors and academic brains, and systematically learn the ropes of managing the delicate and highly sensitive HEI. HEI created skilled staff for the rest of the economy as well as contributing to national competitiveness and economic performance. Any dislocation in HEI will be a dislocation of the national economy with disastrous consequences as happened in China in 1966-1976 when education was fractured beyond repair by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Everyone in Oman knows that the Oman Government was very smart and made decisions that always represented the national long term interests of Oman. The Government of Oman was always engaging academics on national policy imperatives for their input. The researcher and his colleagues are on the National Logistics Research Cluster and he chairs a research team at Middle East College in Oman. National competitiveness was started in education and HEI which delivered strategic human resources to run the whole economy. Very smart Omanisation has been done in government colleges and at the premium mother university of Oman, Sultan Qaboos University, with excellent results where locals were doing very well with many now being professors, faculty and managers in higher education. The same was partly the case at private HEI, although the number of locals was less due to their reluctance to work in private HEI because

of higher teaching loads, mostly lower salaries than government HEI, less annual leave and less benefits in most private HEI in Oman (except about 20% elitist ones which have excellent salaries and benefits matching or exceeding government HEI).

In light of the above findings from literature review and field research the researcher makes the following recommendations for improvements of higher education in Oman both long and short term:-

- a. There was a need for the Oman Government to look at a long term plan to introduce apprenticeship training and related construction and establishment of Polytechnic Colleges. Findings from literature were very clear that there was an oversupply in some areas while technical areas for technicians like motor mechanics, carpenters, boiler makers, mining technicians, electricians, fitters and turners, instrument technicians and others were in dire short supply. Polytechnics following the UK and Germany apprenticeship mode could be established in each governorate or initially in three to four governorates covering all key technical areas to drive a modern futuristic economy. That would be a long term strategy to absorb the many unemployed high school leavers and make them productive and a key driver of the Oman economy.
- b. Government scholarship programme coverage needed a relook to make it wider in view of new emerging disciplines or majors/specialisations to service a new innovative and modern economy that is the reality in Oman.
- c. Colleges needed to be futuristic and guide nation in introducing futuristic programs that create jobs and national wealth in the above and other areas rather than saturation and oversupply in same areas or disciplines, while shortages persist in other areas.
- d. Smart partnerships and regular frank consultative meetings between HEI, government and industry could help to iron out the myriad of HEI challenges faced by students which were affecting their graduation rates downwards as well as affecting them on campus. The easiest way to increase graduation rate was to turn away less qualified students and to ensure that graduated students met industry requirements fully, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:137)[11]. Reputable HEI made it easier for students to get jobs and the main interest of students in any college was assisting them get a good job or something better than their parents, a comfortable salary, tolerable working conditions, and a modicum of job security, (Labaree, 2017:161). But some HEI could argue that they do not own any company then how could they guarantee jobs? They could argue further and say what created flourishing industry was national policies of which they were not responsible neither did they have much say in government policies. The debate must continue to refine HEI policies.

- e. Graduate compliance with industry requirements was a headache for society as a whole as non-compliant graduates could not get jobs, became welfare cases for government or their families, were frustrated and despondent and that situation needed urgent correction – government, society, HEI, schools and industry collaborating and each party doing its best. Parents forcing students to do programmes against their will was a big issue which required education and awareness across Oman society using all media strategies available to reach the most remote areas as well. It was creating many challenges and dislocations. HEI had to revisit syllabi, engage industry on mutually beneficial solutions. Graduate internship should be introduced as compulsory in all HEI in Oman as the country was grappling with excellent graduates who could not get jobs. Observations, global experiences on same issues and discussions with employers and graduated students in Oman all pointed to a lack of industrial experience and production of excellent paper tigers. Only internship can solve that problem for the benefit of all. Many countries have three to eight months compulsory industrial internship for each programme and they do not have this kind of problem. Internship was not at all easy neither was it cheap to implement. Huge budgets were required. A HEI system without internship becomes an enemy within as half-baked graduates were produced who struggled to get jobs and relevance. Experience was not bought from supermarkets like groceries and other consumer goods, but must be given to students by the very industry which demands experience in the form of internships, holiday training and graduate employment. ***Compulsory internship in Oman was long overdue and would solve many employability problems faced by students, employers, society and Government.*** This policy shift needed to be considered as a matter of urgency by Ministry of Higher Education in Oman to realign graduates with industry requirements and achieve market orientation and strategic fit. That was already the norm in most countries of the world for good reasons.
- f. Academic staff diversity was there in Oman HEIs but was still not as good as it was in UAE. In Oman one found mostly faculty from Asia (about 80-90%). Government policies for real diversified academic staff establishments could help enrich student experiences as students would be taught by faculty from all five continents, who would be talking from different academic and geographical experiences thus enriching their students and the final graduate, which benefits the Oman economy and benchmarks the country. UK and many European countries, USA, Australia, China, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have already achieved that. That is the route that ambitious HEIs were now taking, and Oman was known to be a very ambitious and competitive country which wanted nothing less than the best.
- g. Oman needed to establish Academic and Medical Cities and internationalise its HEIs just as was the case in UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as the rest of the world, where students and faculty were recruited globally and HEI aimed at getting the best students and best faculty from any part of the world. International students were a cash cow for UAE and many leading economies, but that was just beginning in some private HEIs in Oman, and on a small scale. With Oman looking beyond an oil driven economy to a knowledge economy this was definitely the route to go. The idea has already been embraced by government and needed to be put in overdrive now to deliver jobs and support a knowledge economy.
- h. The Omani Government could hire consultants from countries which have excelled in kindergarten, primary and high school and HEIs to help them reform the entire education system and deal conclusively with disparities in expected deliverables. Unsuitable graduates were a misallocation of resources that no country wanted. There was no perfect country in the world but such unsuitable graduates needed to be drastically reduced for the good of society, the economy, employers and the graduates themselves. Oman was a country which always wanted the best no doubt.
- i. College admission standards may need a relook to tighten the screening, if need be.
- j. The shackles of NO Objections Certificates (NOCs) restricting and preventing the movement of labour from one employer to the next in Oman needed to be repealed and removed to match Oman's GCC partners and promote healthy competition. NOCs were good for labourers and semi-skilled workers to protect employers naturally as these caused havoc willy-nilly moving from one company to another disrupting operations. But to have NOCs for professional categories and skilled workers was not good for the economy and healthy competition. Employers did not need any protection, but they needed to revise their working conditions to stem an exodus of workers rather than protection. Human resources and economic theory was very clear that employees wanted the best earnings and conditions of service as well as work life balance to remain with any employer. Those are the issues that employers in Oman must address rather than muzzle the movement of skilled/professional labour in the country. Being deserted by skilled labour forced organisations to improve their salaries and conditions of service, which was good for the economy in the form of more disposable income and redistribution of income, which created more demand and expansion in the economy and more jobs. The USA and Europe were excellent examples of this scenario. Good employers never worried about any employee leaving them but

there was always a scramble for their jobs. High labour turnover was a reflection of unsolved grievances and nothing else, chief of which was low salaries, less or no benefits and overworking. Surely this was no secret worldwide. The NOC debate and public discourse needed to continue until there was consensus in Oman. But Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar were already free of NOCs and enjoyed freedom of movement of skilled/professional labour with excellent results on the ground when one looked at their GDPs, FDI, HDI and LPI.

## 19. FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was done through interviews with a few key top academics and administrators and parents as well as researcher observation. The seriousness and extend of these issues could only be established with a bigger sample size than what was used in this research. Those were the limitations of this research. A countrywide survey could be done by other researchers with a larger number of respondents covering the length and breadth of Oman HEI. That would assist Oman Government make major policy shifts in HEI to correct the landscape and come closer to desired situation in the national interest. Reports quoted in this research clearly demonstrated government's concern for the best in HEI as a lot was invested in that sector from public funds and private investors. It was in everybody's interest to get the best return on investment. National competitiveness and a higher GDP depended on a viable HEI sector too. It was deplorable that the majority of faculty members in the United States of America now worked on a part-time contingent basis (temporary), and they were frequently paid wages that put them and kept them in poverty and always looking for something better, (Ferrara, 2015:12). The brain drain was generally from less-developed countries that had poorly developed systems and poor salaries and working conditions to places that paid more and had better facilities, (Altbach, 2016:9)[5]. This statement provided the reason for high staff turnover at some Oman HEI where unresolved issues of concern to faculty drove them away to better paying HEI in Oman and beyond, who may also have lower teaching loads, more benefits and job security. Higher education was considered a trust market: stakeholders trusted that higher education was worth the cost but were asking for evidence of quality that would support the value of higher education, given the large costs, (Antony, Cauce and Shalala, 2017:25)[6]. With the above citations the researcher says it was food for thought for Oman, HEI and Oman researchers to move forward and deliver the best to society through further targeted research.

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