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Dissecting Oman, GCC and global university assessment and employability issues and related blind spots and pitfalls

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Abstract

The main thrust of this research was to contribute to theory building in the Teaching, Theory of Assessment and Employability (TTAE) and their applicability in Oman, GCC and the world at large looking at assessment and employability issues. The research explored gaps in knowledge regarding this theory as a contribution to knowledge, and in this instance, Oman, GCC and global higher education industry was the epicentre of the research and was expected to meet foremost the needs of industry and government as employers of graduated students, then the needs of students and society in knowledge and innovation. This research was conceptual research using literature review only. A constraint is anything that prevents the system from achieving its goal like poor assessment methods, quality issues, inappropriate teaching and learning methods, poor funding, high teaching loads, unattractive research prizes and incentives, low salaries that drive away talented academics and others, and finally poor resourcing. The main reasons giving rise to this research were the facts that some colleges and universities in the world faced challenges in assessment and graduate employability and Oman was no exception. The main objective of this research was to contribute to theory building in the Teaching, Theory of Assessment and Employability (TTAE) and identify critical success factors for efficiency in service delivery excellence to students, industry and society in line with market orientation philosophy. The secondary objective was employability of graduates as the end product, maximising knowledge creation and innovation. Qualitative research method in the form of conceptual research was used in this research. The key findings were that assessment was a continuous learning exercise for excellence, unfair assessment, balancing classes with free time, some uncommitted students, incompetent faculty, outdated syllabus, students from high schools not being college ready, graduates not matching industry requirements, poor internet service, lack of comprehensive assessment training programmes for faculty as capacity building and petty students were the issues at hand affecting assessment and employability.

Keywords: Higher Educations Institutions (HEI), Assessment, Examinations, Accreditation, Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Quality Assurance

1. INTRODUCTION

Oman HEIs have done a lot to develop Oman, provide required strategic human resources and helps systems function for national development. However, there were many teething issues regarding assessment, quality and employability of graduates. Oman was no exception to this. Crow & Dabars (2015:13) contented that for any country to excel, leadership had to come from universities when they said they believed that the academic sector should assume leadership in managing USA accelerating impact on earth, and that universities were the most complex and heterogeneous knowledge enterprises that had ever evolved. Oman and GCC universities must rise up and drive national development as mantle holders for the country as is the case in USA, China and Europe.

My research paper looks at Oman, GCC and global higher education assessment as a driver for knowledge creation and innovation, sustainability and industrialisation, learning from best practices and experiences in assessment, feedback, quality and employability issues globally. This is theory building in the *Teaching, Theory of Assessment and Employability (TTAE)* and tries to find the place for Oman in its knowledge development and innovation. This theory proffers that good well managed university assessment and institutions produced employable graduates who had strategic fit with the labour market and had highly innovative faculty who taught well and were highly productive in research, innovation and industrialisation as well as community service. The area of quality, assessment and employability has seen a lot of controversies. The gap in knowledge here is why these three issues continued in Oman and elsewhere when they are known. That is what this critical literature-based research will unravel. Society is keen to know these issues fully and take corrective measures for the well-being of the national economy and society and the world at large.

In any case the market (the employers, the labour market) buy your finished product, the graduate, through employment, and it was the only reason for existence and should dictate what you do and how you do it. Employers knew what kind of product they wanted, the graduate, for viability, efficiency and competitiveness of their businesses and organisations. That was the economic game which Oman HEIs had to play according to the laws of supply and demand and competition, based on higher education principles and practices which were globally benchmarked. Bok (2017:1) had no kind words saying USA colleges cared more about their profits rather than students and staff, and that the quality of graduates had deteriorated badly. Was this not unqualified generalization surely? The USA was still producing the best graduates in the world by any standards. This could be referring to a minority of pockets of lower-level colleges. It is not entirely true, but these issues did exist as many colleges had been deregistered after failing accreditation process in USA and across the world. Therefore, Bok was not wrong. Rogue characters are always there in all industries though they will be a tiny minority. And that was the reason why Ministries of Higher Education and accreditation bodies policed the system for compliance and punishment and to protect society from rogue colleges.

To be a world-class HEI required more than teaching and note taking, argued former USA Secretary of Treasury under President Obama, Paulson (2015:106), it required world-class professors, and many instructors knew little about markets or modern business practices, and students needed a balance between theory and practice just like the way medical students were trained.

Experiential learning like internships and industrial placements, proffered, (Tiessen, 2018: **Online**), offered much scope for enhancing educational opportunities for post-secondary students to learn about the workplace and to develop skills that may contribute to their future employability. There was unquestionable literature consensus on the value of internship as well as by practitioners in this research.

The lack of practical experience by business graduates was of great concern to employers and many were raising complaints about the credibility and quality of university business education, including academics themselves, (Bok, 2013:308). Compulsory internship came in handy to plug this shortfall and was well entrenched in Oman now. Assessments had to address this through comprehensive course outlines which are foolproof with assessments addressing theory, internship, project-based issues, latest trends in each discipline and the applied or practical side of courses requiring things like Project Management, applied business, AI and Big Data issues.

Strategies aimed at attracting accomplished students can be costly for colleges: i.e. building admissions offices, launching popular undergraduate majors, adding or augmenting graduate programmes, encouraging faculty research, emphasizing honours programmes and study abroad programmes. Campus enhancement could be done through infrastructure like student residences, dining halls, fitness centres and even shopping districts as well as pursuing prestige programmes Bastedo (2012:145). He said imitating market leaders and having information on prestigious benchmarked institutions presented pressure for conformity and catching up, Bastedo (2012:149-151). Oman institutions were always looking to USA and Europe for leadership and benchmarking. But cultural, economic, regional and national stage of development sometimes impedes benchmarking.

Europe and USA have ruthless student disciplinary rules regarding examination malpractice where summary dismissal was the norm. This was done to protect the sanctity and integrity of examinations. The same applies to plagiarism. In Europe, Australia, New Zealand, leading Asian countries and the USA proven plagiarism may lead to expulsion depending on severity or percentage plagiarism. Oman and the GCC have their own disciplinary measures too as a deterrence and to protect the integrity of the system.

1.1 Analysis of assessment methods and MSc degrees

Global best practice for most master's degrees in business and social sciences is to be coursework assessed rather final examinations (70 coursework and 30% for final exams where there are final examinations in a few modules or courses, about 20% only). For these degrees coursework was far better than examinations because it provided students with research, assistance, and time. It also developed the critical thinking, writing and social skills of students. Not only that, with proper coursework help, students can be creative and think out of the box. Using coursework affords students the opportunity to manage their time, plan and take suggestions from experts, and much more. Coursework also developed a strong research culture, extensive use of the library resources and opportunities to interact with practitioners in industry as students explored different issues related to the course. That was very important to get reality, solve real business and societal problems and add value to company operations and society on the ground. It also helped with the much-needed exposure and industrial set-up interactions. These MSc

modules are skills area specialized modules where depth, exposure and theory application to business/societal problems was necessary. That is not achieved in a two-hour examination but in a three to four-week coursework of great rigour and application.

It is also a fact that the more mature and older an institution had the better the quality because of the experience curve or experience effect. The old guard had accumulated so much critical knowledge which fresh academics would not have so quickly and took years to gain and master (about fifteen to twenty years). The academic industry has a different type of apprenticeship or model of gaining experience and expertise. For one to be a distinguished academic one had to have years of experience in the mill or the academic industry. Academics with well-known big names had spent a minimum of twenty years in the industry and published extensively, participated in many university committees, were hard core academic politicians who galvanised and got along with the intricacies of students politics, administrators, society, government, industry, NGOs and had worked with key donors/supranational institutions like EU, UN, World Bank, IMF and others. Anyone whose name does not fit on this list is a mediocre and does not produce the high-quality modern universities were looking for to survive and to attract students and donors/funders and for accreditation. That is why governments of leading economies, and their universities removed the retirement age at universities to tap into the ever-dwindling critical knowledge of these unique academic super stars. They make a name for the university, do big projects and were highly respected in classes at universities, in society and by industry and donors and attracted new students to the universities. Branding started with this group of unique intellectuals. Assessment and feedback benefit a lot from this experience of the masters of the university who nature fresh new academics for years as they build their experience, through workshops, meetings, sharing modules, joint teaching, joint researches, conferences, staff exchanges, symposiums and assessment moderation/scrutiny.

Countries and universities that ignored this reality paid a heavy price in terms of ranking, competitiveness and attracting the ever-elusive new student cohorts in cut-throat competitive student recruitment market, the very students who were the oxygen and lifeline of any university, especially private universities.

1.2 Assessments, work-life balance and global trends

It is now generally agreed that assessments should not be too many such that students cannot have enough time to achieve study-quality social life balance. Quality of life matters even at universities now where faculty should know that students also have social lives to live and enjoy, is not all about tests, assignments, projects and final examinations. The students should not be made hostages of their studies. If one even looked at industry, it is quite clear that it has come to respect the same ethos with many European countries now having a four-day work week as opposed to a five-day work week to give workers adequate work-life balance. The United Arab Emirates is into the final phase of a pilot study of adopting these four working days per week system of work week too, to give its people work-life balance. Just look at the ratings of the UAE in global human development index and economic performance index. The UAE has gone further and introduced a Ministry of Happiness to maximum happiness in the country. This reality should start at schools, colleges and universities. The Norwegian school system long tooted as the best in the world has embraced this aspect of study-social life balance.

Where was Oman and other GCC countries on the same issue? Many countries were busy revising and trimming painful assessments that hold students' hostage till they leave college. It is worse at master's degree level where busy working executives must balance study, work and social life. This study-social life balance issue is work in progress for many countries. But assessment rigour had to be maintained for quality of graduates and the good of industry and society/economy.

1.3 Training faculty and support staff, salaries and benefits issues

Training in authentic assessment facilitates a change in the teacher's belief about teaching and assessment, towards teaching focused on the conceptual change and assessment for and as learning. It also promoted the transformation of assessment instruments to be more realistic, challenging, and feedback-oriented, (Villaruel, et al, 2024). It is in this area that institutions are partly differentiated. Those with the best staff training and staff retention rates tend to have higher student satisfaction rates, better teaching and learning, assessment and quality. Training alone without good conditions of service for staff is self-defeating as you become a training ground where other HEIs poach staff from. We see this competition live amongst GCC countries, Europe, USA and Asia. Saudi Arabia was the magnet of the GCC as it offered unparalleled salaries and conditions of service, a real paradise and heaven on earth. The fight for high-grade academics is typical of the diamond and gold rush in South Africa. With the decline in population growth in the Western world it is only going to get worse. A look at the new Saudi Arabia Neom City project tells you the whole story of the ridiculously attractive salaries and conditions of service (Middle East Eye, 2024), a real paradise (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/foreign-executives-chalk-million-dollar-salaries-neom-report>).

But how could one push up salaries and job security when there was a crisis in HEI in the UK? Some UK HEI were patients in the intensive care in hospital due to funding shortfalls, (The Week, 2024). (<https://theweek.com/education/uk-universities-why-higher-education-is-in-crisis>).

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. The objectives were:

- Exploring global historical perspectives of Oman HEI regarding assessment and employability.
- Identify challenges faced in Oman, GCC and globally on the same issues.
- Scientifically find out the magnitude of assessment and employability issues in HEIs in Oman and globally.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These are:

- What are the global historical perspectives of Oman HEI regarding assessment and employability?
- What are the challenges faced in Oman, GCC and globally on the same issues?
- What is the magnitude of assessment and employability issues in Oman and globally?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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). The research method used in this research was conceptual research. The paper is conceptual in nature and is based on the review of existing literature on global and Oman higher education management focusing on quality, assessment and employability issues. Conceptual research is defined as a methodology wherein research is conducted by observing and analysing already present information on a given topic. Conceptual research does not involve conducting any practical experiments. It is related to abstract concepts and ideas. Philosophers have long used conceptual research to develop new theories or interpret existing theories in a different light. Research papers from various sources have been used as well as books, journals, government reports, conference papers, industry reports, professional association reports and those of research institutes. From these papers a conceptual framework of higher education service delivery has been developed.

The higher education theory was first developed to drive production of high-quality graduates for the national economy and industry.

Watertight reliability and validity measures were employed as expected by academic convention in this kind of research. Thematic analysis has been used here to group related issues and do justice.

Quoting Bodil Johnsson, (Berg and Seeber, 2016:26), explained that academics knew that intellectual work, such as research (the creation of new knowledge) and learning (the creation of new knowledge in oneself), had to be measured in a way totally different from the way we measure the work of industrialization and that what was needed was what she called thinkology rather than technology. Research showed that periods of escape from time were essential to deep thought (Berg and Seeber, 2016:63), creativity, and problem-solving. The question now was where would academics get the necessary escape time for deep and serious reflection on big issues when their schedule was so overloaded? Moreover, how much speed and overload in academics negatively compromised research output and with what consequences for innovation and best practice nationally and on GDP? The neoliberal agenda among many others, stood at odds with ideals of discovery, enquiry and intellectual advancement that academics needed to promote the research endeavor, and academics became isolated from each other and became compliant as resistance to the corporatization of the academy seemed futile, said (Berg & Seeber, 2016:70) quoting Fanghanel. It was quite clear that low research output was affecting teaching quality as testified in this research. Thorp & Goldstein (2010:97) argued that it was commonplace in higher education that good research supported good teaching. How much research funding was available in Oman compared to other countries?

4.1 Industry perspectives and findings

The lack of practical experience by business graduates was of great concern to employers (Bok, 2013:308), and many were raising complaints about the credibility and quality of university business education, including academics themselves. Compulsory internship could come in handy to plug that shortfall. Managing successful academic departments was no easy task at all as advanced by Goldstein & Thorp (2010:72-73). Colleges were not only graduating a generation of students less prepared for the rigours of the world (Selingo, 2013:34), but like the institutions themselves, they would be saddled with debt taken to finance tuition fees. Students who completed degrees have demonstrated a capacity to

do jobs and personal qualities like perseverance (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:22), which were likely to contribute to success in job markets and other facets of life.

5. GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

5.1 Meetings between industry and HEI, funding and other issues

Bok (2017:78) argued for regular meetings between HEIs CEOs and private sector CEOs, saying they were necessary to discuss and close the gap between graduates' skills and industry requirements as that benefited both parties. USA universities shifted to think globally and gained prominence globally after World War I (Cole, 2009:59) and started scouring for talent looking for the best scholars, scientists and students from wherever in the world they might be found. If state funding continued to dwindle the way it is doing now state institutions would have no alternative in future but to scour the globe looking for a shrinking share of full-paying students, (Selingo, 2013:64). Oman was still very much inward looking and had not started serious recruitment of students globally, although it did recruit faculty globally. Oman was still grappling with entrenched traditional methods of education which were incapable of meeting diverse learning needs or producing young people equipped to readily take their places in the workforce, (Al-Ani, 2016:322-336: **Online**). This had improved gradually and was much better now, though still being work in progress.

5.2 Strategic value of skills, strategic fitness and access to HEI

The world was now in a transition period where intellectual capital and brainpower were replacing financial and physical capital as the key to national strength, prosperity and well-being said Crow and Dabars (2015:5) quoting James Duderstadt. They continued saying that Duderstadt said in a very real sense the world was entering a new age, an age of knowledge, in which the key strategic resource necessary for prosperity has become knowledge itself – that is educated people and their ideas, but that universities, who produced these highly skilled people, were besieged by factors like public policies, reductions in public investments and market forces which could make universities fall by the wayside. In Oman the government had already slashed public expenditure for all ministries in line with austerity measures sweeping the GCC due to low oil prices (as it relied on oil income for 65% of its budget). To what extent this was affecting local higher education would be partly revealed in the literature review.

The more important higher education has become to a person's chances of success and to their society's chances to compete globally, the harder colleges have made it for students and their families to afford a college education, said Clawson & Page (2011:50). They went further and said the result was millions of students that have left college with massive debt that has limited their life-chances and millions more were simply unable to afford higher education. That wasn't a tragedy for the individual but for society. Was Oman immune to these tragedies regarding student loans for higher education which were afflicting students and families the world over? The good thing in Oman was that there was generally government funding for almost all HEI students with a few self-paying students in private colleges. And if so, what could be the long-term solution to unshackle society from this bondage of debt and lifelong painful debt trap?

Oman has free education in primary and high school and was not affected by this global phenomenon. In fact, the debt overhang started right from kindergarten, which was sometimes even more expensive than college, right through primary to secondary/high school education. It was the single biggest nightmare for parents nowadays alongside decent house ownership in the USA, Asia and Europe. The authors said we were now living in a world where to suggest that public higher education should be free was regarded as lunacy. The reason was simple – higher education was now a huge multi-billion industry with some colleges/universities trading their shares on Wall Street, USA, just like any other business. That technically meant private universities were answerable to investors just like other business entities, and that profit, ROI and market share mattered like other aspects of corporate management.

Davidson lamented the financial devastation and underfunding of higher education (2017:11), when he said that the war on higher education in some states in the USA had devastating effects on students' lives and student debt as it had resulted in higher tuition, fewer courses options, and advising services and exploited faculty, with nearly half of all courses taught by adjunct faculty (temporary faculty), referred to as part-time labourers, some of whom effectively made less than the minimum wage for a decent life. He was mourning the death of job security, quality jobs in HEI, and quality HEI in USA. Overproduction of PhDs made their dilemma even worse with market saturation now the game globally. It is much more difficult to get an academic job nowadays than it is to reach the stars in the sky. *What made the academic labour market even worse was cronyism and networks of friends and cronies which effectively made the labour market a closed market manned by unshakeable gatekeepers.* The whole system to destroy the academic labour market started in the USA by terribly overproducing PhDs, and then it spread to the rest of the world, and now they talk of the academic dilemma and academic sweatshops (Cheeky Scientist, 2024), (<https://cheekyscientist.com/how-the-academic-phd-job-market-was-destroyed/>). In academics, academic sweatshops were institutions that overworked their faculty and underpaid them, and these were lower-rank colleges in the USA, but the same pattern can be found in other leading economies and the developing world too. It was the lucky and blessed faculty who worked in top-tier research universities in any country who enjoyed the cream and the honey of the academic industry. The author has been lucky to have been associated with such prestigious institutions for his twenty-year academic career. In top-level institutions were where one found the highest academic standards, the highest research output, prestige and status. In the USA the lower-ranked HEIs employed adjuncts, paid much less, and overworked faculty. Oman does not have academic sweatshops as the Government of Oman has very tough accreditation regulations and oversight and has worked very well for the country.

It was the desire and goal of any college to give a good service to society, especially students, hence this research. The feeling good factor was a result of good service, employability of graduates and their advancement in their careers. Why graduates continued to graduate half-baked in some USA HEIs despite five years of university education was an unanswered question. It was found in some countries globally too.

Bastedo (2013:290), shed light on some of the causes of these problems which colleges could address describing it as the academic ratchet and administrative lattice. He quoted (James,

1990; Massy and Wilger, 1992; Massy & Zemsky, 1994), who said academic ratchet was explained by the tendency and preference of academics to move away from tasks such as teaching, student advising and committee work to spend more time on research and other endeavors that are more personally or financially rewarding. Quoting (Ortmann and Other, 2000:20-50) he proffered that administrative lattice was the growing administrative structures, usually with the number of administrative posts growing faster than the number of faculty. Does that exist and to what extent did it affect service delivery in colleges in Oman, literature review would answer that?

6. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Trowler was for the idea that appropriate theoretical/conceptual frameworks should always be researched and tested for their validity. He went further and said as research proceeded the implied theoretical synthesis would need to be flexible to accommodate emerging issues, (Trowler, 2015:44). The researcher was guided by this axiom.

6.1 Theoretical framework

In higher education workflow was the progression of students from first year right up to graduation. A barrier was anything that prevented the system from achieving its goal. Managing barriers maximised value to the HEI as well as its customers and other stakeholders and was a major survival and competitive factor. The thrust of this research was to identify critical success factors for service excellence in academic departments of colleges/universities (teaching, regulatory framework, students' expectations/perceptions, student advisory services, staff, IT systems, Library, support departments, research, assessment, feedback, evaluation and fighting industry competition). This research must identify factors affecting Oman universities assessment and employability and possible solutions. The focus of this research was mainly Oman universities learning from global HEI. It was part of this research to investigate and see how Oman HEI were affected by the Theory of Higher Education Management with focus on assessment and employability issues and to test the relevance and shortcomings of this theory, if any, and contribute to theory building. This theory has generally been tested in manufacturing, industry, mining, NGOs and government operations but not much in academia (colleges and universities). Findings from this research would be quite a breakthrough and would make an important contribution to the management of colleges and higher education institutions.

6.2 Conceptual framework

The Theory of Teaching, Assessment and Employability (TTAE) is an overall management philosophy that is geared to help universities continually achieve their goals. Its measurements are given by throughput (rate of production), operating expenses and employability. A barrier is anything that prevented the system from achieving its goal like poor funding, quality of new students or freshmen into the system, high teaching loads, unattractive research prizes and incentives, low salaries that drive away talented academics and others and finally poor resourcing. Managing them maximised value to the HEI as well as its customers and other stakeholders and was a major survival and competitive factor. The thrust of this research was to identify critical success factors for service excellence in knowledge development and innovation with focus on assessment and employability issues. This research must

identify all barriers facing HEI in Oman and globally and possible solutions.

The underlying theory in this research was the Theory of Teaching, Assessment and Employability (TTAE) which was centred on reducing barriers for service excellence, viability and competitiveness. Investigations in this research would centre on how the multiple variables can be managed to contribute to assessment and employability excellence in Oman HEI. Marketing and operations theory under which services theory falls puts the customer at the centre of everything and said that the customer was king of any organisation. Customer satisfaction was seen as central to everything, and the students were the customers of HEI. Some American books referred to students as the Kings and Queens of HEI. The thrust of this research was to see whether Oman higher education institutions were achieving customer satisfaction all the time, creating knowledge and having good assessment and employability of graduates and the barriers that they faced in achieving that, if any.

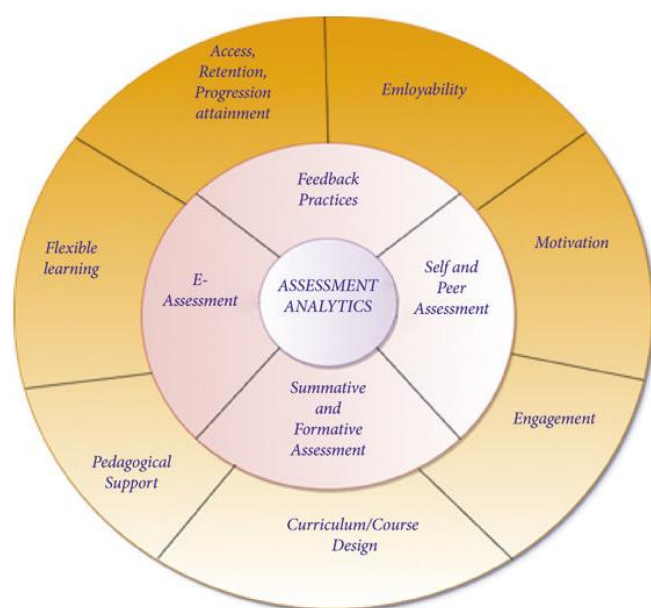


Figure 1: Model for Assessment analytics and feedback framework for enhancing students learning outcomes based on the literature reviewed

Source:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Model+diagram+for+assessment+and+feedback>

7. LITERATURE REVIEW ON TEACHING, ASSESSMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY

7.1 Introduction

Students who completed degrees have demonstrated a capacity to do jobs and personal qualities like perseverance which are likely to contribute to success in job markets and other facets of life, (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:22). Berg and Seeber, 2016:34) were convinced that all students wanted teachers who were enthusiastic about the material and appreciate their efforts to comprehend it and wanted to leave the class energized, besides saying that pleasure experienced by instructors and students was the most important predictor of learning outcomes. Comprehensive foolproof assessments were part of this equation. Discussions on feedback

processes must consider consequential feedback as instrumental in making students and educators optimize its use and effect on learning, (Quinlan & Pitt, 2024). This was instructive with far reaching effects on attainment and graduation as well as employability.

7.2 Politics of marking and marks

The firing of tenured Professor Dominique Homberger, Biology teacher, for failing too many students and the new teacher awarding 25% on previous exam at Louisiana State University in 2010, signaled deteriorating standards, grade inflation, the end of rigour on campuses and most of all – the diminishing power of professors in the classroom, where students were increasingly gaining the upper hand and since then professors knew that students expected convenience, ease and entertainment, (Selingo, 2013:19). Was Oman immune to these developments? This will be revealed by literature reviews and further studies which have conducted field research on these issues. Oman was a smart country with very high accreditation and academic standards. But assessment and employability were very difficult issues which even developed countries were grappling with daily, is a continuous never ending learning experience.

Grade inflation had eroded the value of degrees in USA and was a great cause for concern for employers and industry, and degree grades meant almost nothing, and employers have lost faith and do not use grades as indicators of success any more but rely on other tests of competence in interviews, (Selingo, 2013:24). How many students hop from interview to interview in the GCC and globally failing the interviews, but they have passes in their degrees – appendices are very instructive in this regard? And one wonders why that continued despite the existence of quality assurance systems and national accreditation bodies whose job was policing and enforcing standards. The world is awash with these cases, especially the countries with very large populations where mass production is encouraged and standards suffer. Examples are USA, China, Europe, Pakistan and some African countries as will be revealed in literature review.

Berg and Seeber, 2016:36 advised that when classes went well, everyone thought better and recent research agreed that people were all the more, clever. In USA 89% of four-year public universities had already provided online classes as a way of dealing with budget cuts and Thomas Friedman was so upbeat about online teaching describing it thus, “Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty, by providing them an affordable education to get a job or improve in the job they have; nothing has more potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world’s biggest problems and nothing has more potential to enable us to re-imagine higher education,” (Mettler, 2014:33). Unfortunately, online classes are still in their basic infancy and 99% of education is in classes or brick and motor system. Berg and Seeber, 2016:41 had a grim statement about academics saying they should stop abusing themselves with overwork as it did not help students learn and ruined academics’ health and caused academics to break down and most importantly made them hate students. But did they have control over working hours surely, it was the college management instead.

Marking assignments was the least enjoyable part of academic work, and perhaps the way to reduce stress of marking is to ensure that assignments are not just tools for evaluation but rather are useful and enjoyable for the students themselves, and finally that as far as students were concerned the assignments were the course,

(Berg & Seeber, 2016:50). They believed that students learned on the basis of what they do in your course, not based on what you know. There is no better truth. But there were situations where students bought assignments from the street (the grey market) and one would ask what they learnt when they bought an assignment and presented it as theirs? This was obviously illegal but was well known to exist. Where is the learning in such a scenario? Off course viva voce is one innovation to stem the incidence of grey market academic documents, but students still circumvent those by memorizing the assignment or project and do answer well but some fail the viva voce and are punished with zero grading for that assignment. Expulsion of students for plagiarism and grey market documents is the norm in Europe, USA and the rest of the Western world. Assessment facilitates students learning and is an ongoing evaluative pedagogical exercise and helped faculty improve overall programme for aggregates of students, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:31). Payment of fees was one of the major reasons that drove students to work hard and be committed in their studies in HEI and achieve well in assessments.

7.3 Quality issues and class dynamics

Although the quality of academics is 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 explained 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. So how did people expect students to do well in assessments given all these realities? It was a question of balancing entertainment and studying. Berg and Seeber, (2016:53) quoting Ginsberg, argued that today's captains of erudition saw the 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 (p168). He said the quantifying and profit tagging was wrong as it did not recognize the scholarly activities recognized, promoted and rewarded at universities.

The changes to academic labour have increased the expectations of what it means to be a productive scholar, while simultaneously increasing class sizes and expanding academics job descriptions where faculty are caught in a paradox because of lack of time and space, (Berg & Seeber, 2016:54-55).

The classroom had become a one giant game of favour exchanges between students, professors and administrators and when each plays their part, they all came winners; students got better grades; adjunct professors keep their jobs year after year, full time professors win tenure or spend less time dealing with students complaining about bad grades, and administrators are rewarded with more money and higher rankings, (Selingo, 2013:21). Axtell (2016:345) was of the view that there was pressure to produce high quality research and to teach well in universities and this pressure came from many sources like students' evaluators; book reviewers, and prize committees; journal editors; grant and fellowship administrators; retention, promotion and tenure committees; learned and honorary societies and endowed-chair selectors. The researcher would add other sources of pressure to be HEI as employers for security of employment plus for fundraising through consultancy, accrediting agencies and external examiners. Course evaluations now looked like customer satisfaction surveys from department stores and students comment on how enjoyable the

course was or how fun the course was but say little about how much they learnt or challenges of the course, (Selingo, 2013:21). The author said that the students viewed themselves as customers who needed to be satisfied, viewed the professor at the front of the room as a performer, much like when they go to a concert or a movie and want to be engaged, persuaded and entertained and teachers struggle to stop use of mobile phones by students in classes. Generally speaking, 95% of students only care about the grades and do not seem to be interested in gaining knowledge, and professors who are hard graders did not get high positive scores, (Selingo, 2013:10). Assessment standards like passing and failing students, bell curves, grades and standardized testing were developed in the 19th century and some of those were now outdated and not serving the purpose of a modern economy and labour market, (Davidson, 2017:200).

Many reports have pointed to limited learning during undergraduate studies and now parents and students wanted to know if programmes had enough rigour and coverage to justify the cost and reap the reward of employment in the job market, (Selingo, 2013:71). Good appropriate assessments have a lot to do with what students actually learn as you have checks and balances through those assessments.

Many students arrive on campus unprepared to do college Mathematics and need extra courses to brush up what they should have covered in high school and universities have not been very successful with such students, (Selingo, 2013:75). It is no secret that Maths has been the reason for many discontinues and dropouts at colleges in Oman too. Most colleges are not concerned with the perfect class than with getting students to enroll as admissions is their lifeblood, so drawing as many applicants as possible was a hedge against the complex game of predicting yield, (Selingo, 2013:79). A few of those students fail the rigours of higher education and become dropouts or discontinue. Attrition is a natural thing in the field of education. What is best is to monitor the numbers and that they comply with national, regional and global norms.

7.4 Attainment rates

Attainment rates were a product of two factors and were measured by numbers of students enrolled in higher education and a fraction of those who completed their studies, (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:21). The main obstacles to higher education as well as degree completion were money, those who find themselves in universities, but universities are not for them, poor financial and academic guidance for families and students, especially first-generation students and heroic work schedules which are not compatible with focus and completing degree programmes in a timely way, (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:24). Overworking naturally affects part time students who may not have the energy to sustain the rigours of higher education. That is indulged in as subsistence and to raise funds for fees, etc.

The factors that favoured degree completion were passing foundation courses, peer effects, higher social class, ingrained expectations at selective institutions and rich teaching resources, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:29-30). They argued that poorly resourced institutions affected degree completion as well as repeating failed courses, like Mathematics, which is a challenge for most students. Poor students also faced financing challenges, they said. English had become the main language of higher education global communication in the context of 21st century globalization,

Altbach, (2016:8). The Oman national policy needed to be updated continuously as the higher education landscape changed globally.

Antony, Cauce and Shalala (2017:133) worried that college completion had become a hot topic in USA and institutions like NSU are working hard to get better degree completion rates. Degree completion is heavily affected by social 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 meet industry requirements fully, (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:137). Assessment required being fearless and honest; it mostly looked at what was not working and focuses on change and assessment was also driven by accreditation requirements and threats of losing accreditation, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:23).

7.5 Financing and the academic struggle

At most American institutions costs were spiraling out of control and quality was declining just as increasing international competition demanded that higher education be more productive and less expensive, (Selingo, 2013:XVII). That was the phenomena worldwide which families, institutions and governments are grappling with, and Oman is no exception. Jeffrey exposed the low degree completion rate in the USA which he said was just above 50%. In Oman government confirmed that 10000 students left tertiary institutions and discontinued their studies for various reasons like marriage, inability to cope with the rigours of higher of higher education, early employment, lack of fees, family problems and peer pressure (see appendices). For a small country the size of Oman that is a bit of a worry and that number needed to be brought down as much as possible. Oman was very generous and provided scholarships for most of the students with good passes.

James Altucher, the author of 'Be The Luckiest Person Alive,' said he met students 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 said 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 could teachers motivate the latter group which did not want college and did not even know why they were there? Were teachers not being blamed for nothing when there were other factors beyond their control?

8. STRATEGIC FIT BETWEEN GRADUATES AND INDUSTRY REQUIREMENTS

8.1 Introduction

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 meet industry requirements fully, (Bowen & McPherson, 2016:137). Good assessments solve all this by having comprehensive course outlines which have foolproof assessment methods addressing both theory and the practical side of modules to meet industry skills requirements fully.

By the 1980s most corporate recruiters were telling universities that they were going to hire a few graduates for specific jobs and that graduates had to create their own jobs, which was at first quite

frightening for students, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:101-102). This is what was driving governments to make entrepreneurship a compulsory course for every programme in almost all countries now, although the results were mixed. To date they said University of Wisconsin (UW) had created 300 spin-off companies with another 100 in the pipeline. This was very much in its infancy in Oman and needed to be developed more seriously to create more new jobs for graduates. No single economic event was more feared than losing a job, as it was a disruptive personal experience, it was nagging, caused personal devastation and it wreaked havoc and fueled social and anxiety across the society and also affected parents and students' decisions on where to go to school/college, their ability to stay in school/college and complete their degree, (McGee, 2015:55-56). Unemployment caused stress and depression as it denied one the opportunity to earn a living wage, personal dignity and the ability to be independent.

It was not surprising that society was very much concerned about unemployment and jobs. Survival depends on jobs too as well as personal dignity and respect. Unemployment could cause hypertension and high blood pressure as well as stress and psychosomatic disorders, social upheavals, marriage break-ups and divorces. The unemployed did not have access to money (unemployment benefits in developed countries help in this respect), could not enjoy financial independence and the shopping experience in shopping malls, the property market, car industry, restaurants, hotels and other places. Personal dignity and peace of mind suffered too. In some countries even marriage becomes quite difficult as it is very costly.

8.2 Employment of graduates and the painful truth about it

Employment creation was a very tricky social science blending economics, marketing, operations and other business areas. Strategists said that maximum employment creation was in countries with the best global competitiveness and ease of doing factors, e.g. United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia which led the GCC in that respect. It was not just a game of universities graduating the best graduates only. Jobs were created by industry and universities did not own those industries. Investors and industries were attracted to countries with the best quality of life and the best global competitiveness and ease of doing factors. Universities did not create these factors but national governments. Questioning universities why there was or was not unemployment of their graduates is good practice but is highly debatable because of what I have just explained. My point is that countries needed a smart partnership between government, industry and academia for a win-win situation in employment creation, internship/graduate employment and graduate suitability. The government must lead and create a highly competitive investment environment that attracts maximum investment and industrialization, thus jobs as well. Universities played their part by doing their critical role of teaching, research and community service but needed a lot of freedom and adequate funding to succeed as they supported the national economy. Professor Jonathan Cole said it all when he said that great universities were meant to be unsettling; they challenged orthodoxies and dogmas as well as social values and public policies; they were the most effective instruments for creating skepticism and discontent with established institutions and distinguished universities must entertain and not suppress the most radical thoughts, Cole (2009:380). Innovation came from this thrust of challenging the status quo and coming up with innovations for economic progress and prosperity and was why the

USA led the world in innovation and job creation. The world must learn from the USA and other economic powerhouses their secrets for their exceptional economic performance and employment creation. It would then be very easy for graduates to graduate and easily get jobs. In the GCC we must all ask why the United Arab Emirates is the magnate and talk of the region. Here are the facts: <https://gulfnews.com/business/markets/uae-to-attract-9800-millionaires-in-2025-topping-global-high-net-worth-migration-1.500174878>. The UAE is on track to be the biggest attraction for millionaires in the whole world and will attract 9800 millionaires in 2025. That would translate into jobs and industrial expansion and have a multiplier effect on the whole economy. Why are other countries not doing that as they equally want investment and employment creation too? The UAE has big academic cities, tourism cities, medical cities, internet cities and Economic Free Zones and all these create thousands of jobs too. They also have golden visas for ten years to attract investors, top academics, scientists, artists and other specialists in all areas (not a two-year visa which has no job security of tenure and makes planning life difficult). Where do you expect the best STEM PhDs and academics and scientists to go for employment – UAE naturally, and Saudi Arabia, the economic giant of the GCC and entire Middle East? The UAE's quality of life is a yardstick for the GCC. Saudi Arabia is a darling of the media with its economic wonders and breathtaking projects like Neom City and others. Is it not time to copy these two countries and enjoy the same benefits? An open business friendly economy with a global orientation supports job creation and graduate employment 100%, nothing else. The markets shift towards such countries as a rule and rewarded them through maximum investment. Saudi Arabia has proven that with its attractive economic reforms and that have attracted global investors and poured in billions of US\$ into its economy. No economic talk is complete in the GCC without mentioning Saudi Arabia and the UAE – why? Their economic policy successes are in the public domain as points of reference like the USA after the 2nd World War. The whole GCC is quite ethical and disciplined with excellent anti-corruption policies which is good for business.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Much has been done about university assessment and employability globally and in Oman but more still need to be done. Higher education has always been a work-in-progress industry, learning and relearning. MOHERI needed to have a real time system that fed them with students' feelings and satisfaction about teaching and learning, employment, feelings and concerns of faculty on teaching and learning conditions and environment. They also needed a regular feedback system with industry for graduate performance and concerns about relevance of syllabi. That could be done through regular surveys and meetings maybe once per year. If such a system was there, then there would be fewer concerns about graduate suitability for labour market and syllabi related issues. Higher education was always work-in-progress and improvements always happened as you operate learning from other institutions and other countries.

10. LIMITATIONS IN THIS RESEARCH

This research faced several limitations. One of those limitations was access to some documents considered sensitive which would be out of reach. However, researcher compensated for most of those shortfalls through triangulation of sources. That helped to bring many issues to the fore. The research was quite objective. Time would always be an issue for a working academic during the

teaching season. Having more time on the ground could have possibly led to the unearthing of even more issues. However, the researcher used diverse comprehensive sources covering all issues that normally affected assessment and employability in HEI in any country as reflected by the rich literature review and analysed in this research. There was no doubt that coverage was comprehensive. The research remains relevant, and coverage was good meeting academic standards of rigour, checks and balances.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The highly controversial debates reflected here point to the following recommendations across Oman HEI for better assessment and employability of graduates:

- Regular compulsory structured training in HEI diverse assessment methods, pedagogics, innovation and research by top HE experts for all faculty and support staff was necessary as an ongoing exercise (workshops covering teaching, learning, assessment and employability. It is there but needed ramping up and tightened systematically.
- There was a real need for Oman Government to establish more polytechnics and vocational training colleges offering apprenticeship training and vocational education which produced much-needed technicians for industry and the country in their thousands and could absorb those not suitable for other HEIs, but who were vocationally minded.
- Oman HEI, government and industry needed to have regular national dialogue and discourse about all teething issues affecting students, employers and government at HEI like forced specialisations on students by parents/majors and many other issues raised in this research paper and find consensus solutions long term.

12. FUTURE RESEARCH

Oman universities had a done a lot in higher education assessments development and employability which was acknowledged and respected by the whole world, but more still needed to be done for excellence. Issues differed across the Asia continent where some HEI could have the same, or different or bigger issues even of a different dimension. Other researchers could do a countrywide and regional surveys and interviews involving many countries, observations with larger numbers of students, faculty, administrators and government and have a wider and bigger sample. Many issues still needed answers like why those challenges persisted when they were known, how they could be solved, by whom, and when and what was required institutionally and nationally to address those issues. Was it possible to solve some of the challenges or not? The Theory of Teaching, Assessment and Employability (TTAE) was an ongoing debate in Oman HEI, GCC and globally and barriers did affect HEIs in terms of quality, assessment and employability of graduates.

Interest Conflicts

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