



QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN 21ST CENTURY - A CASE OF OMAN

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Abstract

Higher education sector in Oman has grown and made significant development in the last decade. There is heavy investment to improve the education infrastructure, provide increased education opportunities with focus on women education to ensure equality and equity. The spread of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of all types, diversified programmes and establishment of Quality Assurance Council is a testimony to the importance given by the nation to ensure quality of higher education that the needs/requirements of 21st century are met. In order to achieve an international standard in higher education, all HEIs have adopted - imported curriculum, recruited international / expatriate faculty and English as a medium of instruction. Despite these efforts, the quality of education in term of 21st century, requirement both in terms of knowledge acquisition and skills seems to be missing and is not up to the desired level. The objective of this study is to find out to what extent abilities have improved vis-à-vis the requirements and the missing factors responsible for knowledge acquisition and skills. This paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data is collected from various Omani HEIs using observation and interview methods.

Key Words: Higher education, curriculum, faculty, knowledge, skills.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expending very fast in Arab countries due to increase in social demand for education and priority of the governments to produce efficient and effective human resources according to the requirements of their economies. The financial and administrative capacity of these countries to respond this growing demand has been well debated in the literature. To improve the quality of higher education, various approaches have been adopted. The shifting of education to private sector to overcome the growing demand and improve quality is one the approach used in most of the Arab countries. Various types of accreditation institutions have been developed to check the quality. Despite of continuous efforts for improving higher education, there is still widespread criticism about the quality of higher education in GCC countries (Shah and Baporikar, 2010).

The educational history of the Sultanate of Oman has undergone rapid development. In 1970, there were three primary schools in the country with less than 1000 students and no college or university (Al Bandary, 2005 and Al Shmeli, 2009). Today, there are more than 62 higher education institutions run by private and public sector offering various programmes. The total number of students in Higher Education in Oman in 2009 is approximately 80,000 (Al Shmeli, 2009). Higher Education Institutions are owned and governed by a variety of entities, including the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Man Power, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, other governmental entities, and private owners (OAC, 2006).



HEIs provide human resources which are expected to be equipped with skill and knowledge necessary for society as occupational and citizen. Oman has a young, dynamic and fast-growing higher education sector and has taken a number of steps to provide quality human resources equipped with necessary skills and knowledge to replace expatriate work force. These steps include imported curricula of western countries, recruitment of native English teachers, recruitment of qualified and experience faculty from all over the world in various disciplines, provision of excellent infrastructure facilities to the students and arrangements of one / two years foundation courses by each HEIs including English language, mathematics and IT to build students basis for advance curricula at university level. To monitor quality of each HEI, Oman Accreditation Council has been established. It has been observed that despite of various efforts, the quality of education in term of 21st century requirement both in terms of knowledge acquisition and skills seems to be missing and is not up to the desired level.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data is collected from various Omani HEIs using observation and interview methods. The objectives of this study are:

- To what extent abilities have improved vis-à-vis the requirements for quality education.
- To find out the missing factors responsible for knowledge acquisition and skills of the students.

Literature Review

Reforms and quality enhancement in education has been a major concern to authorities in different parts of the world. Almost every country in the world is reforming its educational system in order to reinforce the social and national identity in its learners and to help them better respond to the economic, technological and political demands of the rapidly changing future. (Al-Sadi, 2012)

In the Arab world the higher education sector began its development in the late 1950s. Till 1980s, it has been dominated by a public sector monopoly and then due to the sizable failure of public universities to meet the demand for highly qualified university graduates needed for social and economic development, a large number of private and international universities and colleges, and as a natural response to the spread of globalization's ideas, privatization, and openness to foreign cultures, the number of private and international universities and colleges has exceeded several hundred and attracted a large number of students. Now the Higher Education (HE) sector is consist of diverse HEIs with different curricula. (Savic, 2012)

Higher education plays an important role in the development of human resources. One of its main tasks is to supply societies with a professional labour force that is highly specialized to work in occupations that require a high degree of practical and theoretical skills and knowledge. The importance of this task has motivated governments to pay great attention to the development of higher education, both in terms of quantity and quality. (Martan, M, 2007). In general, it has been observed that the students' academic performance has met neither the institution's nor the sponsor's expectations, nor indeed the students' or their families'. The accepted explanations for the students' difficulties include: outmoded pedagogical practice in their home countries; the challenges of learning in English; gaps between assumed knowledge and actual high school curriculum; and religious/cultural difference. In spite of the fact that the students are not only financially supported by their government but also guaranteed graduate employment, they are free of burdens placed on other international students. (Katerina Gauntlett, 2005)

The higher education sector is undergoing rapid expansion and transformation in the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). There exists too the question of what to teach, and how to go about teaching it. As campuses are built and physical infrastructure is put in place, there are also mounting concerns over quality control and accountability. How will teaching standards be enforced and how will research output be measured? International partnerships are equally central to the GCC universities. Some have attracted big name western institutions while others are tied to unaccredited institutions from other parts of the world. As of yet, there is little uniformity. The sector has also been routinely criticized across the region for failing to meet the needs of either the public or the private sector. Curriculum development has been problematic. Initially the Gulf universities relied wholly on imported teaching materials, often from Egypt, Syria, and



Lebanon. A lot of these contained examples and information not entirely compatible with the needs of Gulf higher education. More recently there has also been much discussion of how to go about teaching in Gulf universities. Rote learning and traditional lectures are gradually being replaced by seminar based teaching that revolves around meaningful class discussions and a promotion of critical thinking. The new campuses are impressive. Lavish constructions and big budgets have ensured a pleasant educational environment and good resources for learning. However, there is a question mark over the enforcement of minimum standards.

The GCC has now become home to several branch campuses of leading international Universities, while existing universities have invariably sought partner institutions. If the GCC higher education sector does not improve soon, there is a concern that GCC nationals will be left as bystanders while expatriates continue to fill the plethora of employment opportunities being created by the new post-oil Gulf economies. Most important to their success, however, are high-quality faculty, committed and well-prepared students, and sufficient resources. Many students start their studies academically unprepared for higher education. Poor basic and secondary education, combined with a lack of selection in the academic system, lie at the root of this problem. Yet rarely does an institution respond by creating remedial programs for inadequately prepared students. According to the laws and regulations for the establishment and provision of private higher education, local universities and colleges must be affiliated to recognized and accredited foreign universities. The systems, methods, programmes and qualifications of these universities are adopted in the Oman institutions so; on the whole, they can be characterized as franchised higher education programmes (Peril and Promise, 2000).

The Sultanate of Oman is experiencing significant reform in its higher education system. Until fairly recently, most efforts were placed on expanding primary and secondary schooling in order to accommodate the growing population of young nationals.

Background of Higher Education in Oman

There have been several key phases in the development of higher education in Oman which is given below:

Prior to 1970: No formal higher education in Oman

1970s-1980s: Establishment of public colleges (with an emphasis on vocational education and training, particularly in teaching and health) and Sultan Qaboos University.

1990s-present: Import of foreign programs, delivered in Oman through private HEPs (colleges and universities). This was an attempt to rapidly grow the sector in response to an identified need.

New Phase: Establishment of a comprehensive higher education system. This is an attempt to consolidate gains by implementing effective and efficient quality assurance and quality enhancement process (OAC, 2006).

Oman's system of higher education is dynamic and has grown rapidly over the past three decades. Oman has developed an independent system of higher education consisting of 62 HEIs and providing post secondary diploma or degree programmes.

Out of 62 HEIs, two-third is public institutions, operating through various ministries and agencies as detailed in table 1 below:

Table 1: Government and Private HEIs in the Sultanate of Oman

Under the Jurisdiction of	Higher Education Institutions	No. of Institution
Independent	Sultan Qaboos University (Government)	01
		01
Ministry of Higher Education	Colleges of Applied Sciences (Government)	06
	Private Universities	05
	Private Colleges, two of which are designated as University Colleges	19
	Total	30
Ministry of Manpower	Higher College of Technology (Government)	01
	Colleges of Technology (Government)	05
	Oman Tourism College (Private)	01
	Total	07
Ministry of Health	Nursing Institutes (Government)	11
	Health Science Institutes (Government)	05
	Total	16
Ministry of Defense	Academies / Training Centers (Government)	04
	The Command and Staff College (Government with restricted admission)	01
	Total	05
Ministry of Aqaf and Religious Affairs	The Institute of Shari'a Sciences (Government)	01
	Total	01
Royal Oman Police	The Royal Oman Police Academy (Government, with restricted admission)	01
	Total	01
Central Bank of Oman	The College of Banking & Financial Studies (Quasi-Government)	01
	Total	01
Total Number of Higher Education Institutions		62

Source: Al Shmeli, 2009

Out of total 78,858 enrolments (approximately 80,000), 45,337 students are enrolled in government HEIs and 33,521 students in 24 private HEIs. Approximately 12,000 Omani students are currently studying abroad. For the academic year 2007-08, the percentage of enrollment in science majors (Engineering, Information Technology, Health, Natural Sciences, Physics, Agricultural, Architecture, and Construction) accounted for 45.5% of the overall enrollment; Humanities 35.4%; and Commerce and Economics constituted 19.1% (Al Shmeli, 2009).

HEIs in Oman can be classified into local and overseas:

Local HEIs: These institutions are locally developed. Some of them have partnership arrangements with outside institutions, while others operate independently.

Overseas HEIs: These institutions are opened in Oman by overseas HEIs. They are under the control of overseas institutions.

Similarly, HEIs can be classified on the basis of academic programmes:



Multiple Programmes: Some HEIs offer a wide range of academics programmes such as humanities, social sciences and engineering etc.

Specialized Programmes: Some HEIs offer specialize programme in one or two specific fields such as nursing, teaching, engineering and business.

HEIs can also be classified on the basis of sponsorship:

Public Sector Institutions: Public sector institution can be further divided into two:

Public Sector Colleges: Various HEIs (colleges) are run and control by government. Various government ministries are involved such as the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Industries and Commerce.

Public Sector Universities: There is only one public sector university "Sultan Qaboos University" which runs independently.

Private Sector Institutions: Private sector institutions can be dived into two:

Private Sector Colleges: There are various colleges which is run and control by private sector. Some are providing local made programmes and some have imported programmes.

Private Sector Universities: There are five universities in various location of the country which are run independently by private sector.

OAC (OAC, undated) has classified the HEIs in Oman on the basis of scope / activities and provided the following classification of institutions:

Colleges of Higher Education: The term "College" is used in a generic sense and includes institutions of Higher Education which have names such as "Academy" or "Institute". Higher Education Colleges are primarily teaching institutions, offering programmes to the level of Bachelor's degree or may conduct undergraduate programmes in one or more broad fields or may offer a wide range of community and professional courses at the undergraduate level on a flexible basis to meet community requirements. Some institutions offer a variety of programmes, while others are specialist institutions, offering programmes in one or two professional fields, such as teaching, nursing, engineering or business studies. In addition to formal award courses, Higher Education Colleges frequently provide courses in areas such as English Language, Business and IT. These may be stand-alone courses, or may contribute towards a diploma or degree offered by the institution. The concentration on teaching in Higher Education Colleges means that the quality of teaching and learning should be high. There is no established research base and publications. The head of such institution is usually called Dean.

University Colleges: University Colleges have a strong commitment to excellence in teaching. A University College shares some of the key characteristics of a University including research activity relevant to local and national needs, appropriate research facilities, and programmes up to and including the Master's degree in at least two broad fields of study. The University College has reasonable investment in research equipment and laboratories, as well as staffing to support the research function. The resources and infrastructure required to adequately support research and postgraduate programmes are usually larger and more expensive than Higher Education Colleges. In particular, library, computer labs, research journals and internet access are substantially greater than Higher Education Colleges. Equipment and facilities for staff and student research must be more extensive. Master's degree programmes at University Colleges may include research degrees. Academic staff for Master's research degree programmes should be involved actively in research at the forefront of their discipline and should be proficient in utilizing international research networks. Where advanced professional programmes are offered, the academic staff involved should have extensive relevant professional experience at a senior level, as well as appropriate academic qualifications. The head of University College is usually designated as Dean with appropriate qualification and professional experience.

Universities: Universities have a strong commitment to excellence in teaching and research. The University's scope of activities in academics and research is also comparatively more than other HEIs (College of Higher Education and University College). Universities have a demonstrated commitment to the development and

transmission of knowledge through research, scholarly publication, teaching, and community service, in all fields in which they operate.

The basic characteristics of University are:

- Offers programmes of Bachelor, Masters and or Doctoral level.
- Conducts research in various field at local, national and international level, organizes conferences and other programmes in advanced professional practice in cooperation with professional bodies.
- The availability of adequate resources, equipment, infrastructure and facilities to support staff and students to contribute in research at the national and international contexts.
- The academic staff in the University is usually more qualified holding PhDs with substantial research publications/professional experience.
- The university administration reflects the academic maturity and intellectual independence. Considerable academic authority is there with rigorous mechanisms to ensure high academic and professional standards are maintained.
- The head of University is usually designated as President, Rector or Vice Chancellor.

All public HEIs are fully funded by government revenues which cover all capital and operating expenditures as well as tuition, and include student allowances generous enough at the high end (students at Sultan Qaboos University) to cover books, accommodation and living expenses. At the same time, Government subsidizes private colleges through scholarships, land grants and tax exemptions. In addition, qualifying private universities receive a grant of RO 17 million for quality improvements directly related to the classroom and learning resources and a matching grant of RO 3 million, totaling RO 20,000,000, or approximately 52,000,000 US\$.

Conceptual Framework

In Oman two types of factors are responsible for the acquisition of knowledge and skill i.e. internal factors and external factors. Both kinds of factors is given in figure 1.1

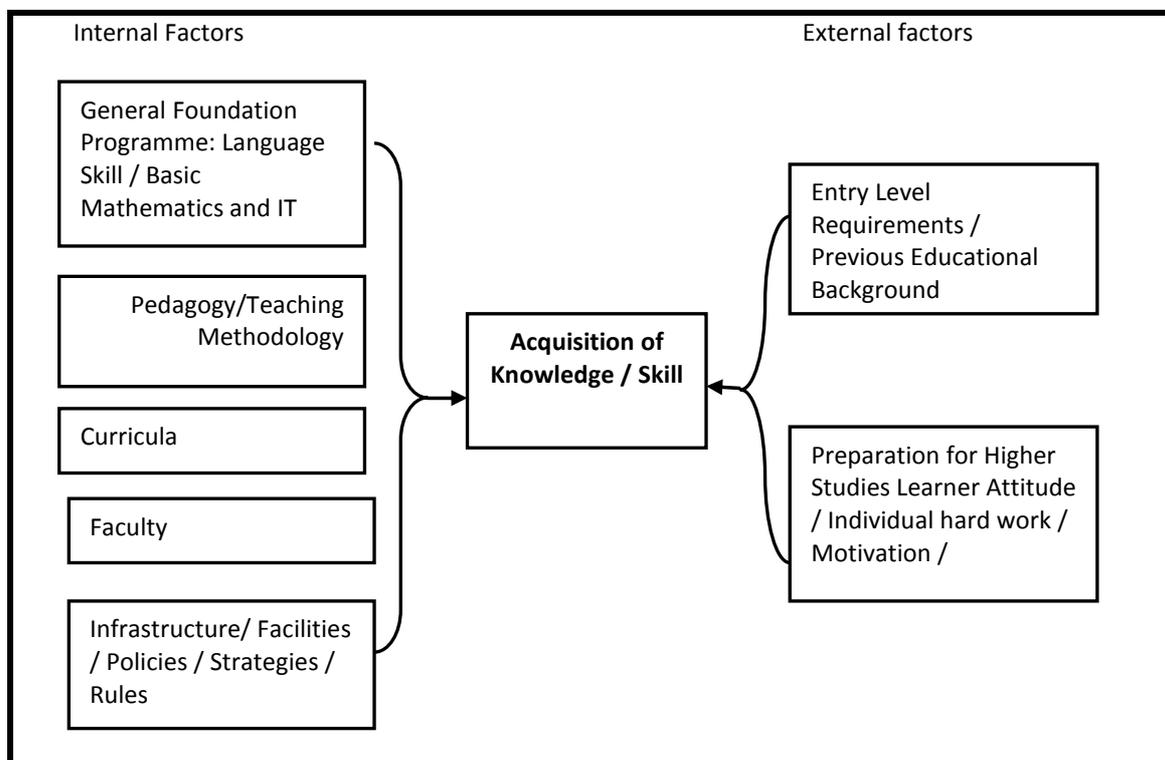


Figure 1.1: Factors Responsible for Acquisition of Knowledge and Skill at HEIs

In Oman, internal factors responsible for the acquisition of knowledge and skill include language skill, pedagogy/teaching methodology, curricula, faculty and infrastructure facilities and policies for which HEIs are responsible to provide to the students in an efficient and effective way required for the student individual growth and society requirement. External factors include the students' previous educational background and attitude/motivation toward higher education as these do affect student knowledge and skill to be provided by HEIs.

The basic problem is that despite of all efforts taken by the government and HEIs to improve quality of education in Oman, HEIs have been criticized for producing graduates having low skill and knowledge. In the below section, an effort has been made to find out that which factors contribute more in this failure.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSTION

It is find out on the basis of personal experience, deep observation and extensive interview with professionals across the various HEIs in Oman that there are six important variables (divided into internal and external variables) require for the acquisition of knowledge and skills as indicated in figure 1.1. To show the contribution of each variables in the acquisition of knowledge and skill is discusses below.

General Foundation Programme (Language Skill/Basic Mathematics and IT): The General Foundation Program (GFP) consists of one/two years has been adopted by all public and private HEIs operating in the Sultanate. The GFP focus on four areas of learning: English Language, mathematics, IT and general learning skills. More than 80% of students entering HEIs in the Sultanate of Oman are first required to take a general foundation program (Carroll, 2009; Al-Mamari, 2011). This program is designed to raise the academic capabilities of students prior to their formal entrance into higher education studies. The aim of the GFP is to give the students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the requirements of academics and providing them with the necessary acquisition skills. The Ministry of Higher Education and HEIs is investing considerable resources on GFP. However, evidence suggests that these recourses are not achieving the objectives (Al Mamari, 2012). Various studies and personal experience indicated that foundation programs contributed very less to improve the English language proficiency and mathematics needed for academic studies. A numbers of studies have been conducted to show that why GOF failed to improve students' skill in English, mathematics and IT to fit them for graduate academics studies. Some identified that that the biggest challenge facing HEIs is the low level of the English language of school graduates (Al-Mamari, 2012). Some criticized the existing teaching methodology while other criticized the contents of courses is the main cause of failure of GFP. Almost all academics researchers are agreed that the school education provided to the student is very weak to fit them for higher education. Resultantly a gap exists between school education and university education. Therefore, GFP has been started in all HEIs to fill the gap. However, GFP itself not able to improve students' skill in English, mathematics and IT despite of good contents, appropriate teaching methodology and well qualified foreign faculty in all HEIs. Thus, basic required skill including English, mathematics and IT is one of the barriers in the way of acquisition of knowledge and skill at HEIs in Oman.

Pedagogy/Teaching Methodology

There are many definitions of pedagogy. Perhaps the simplest is 'The science of teaching' or "The art of teaching". Teaching methodology for the acquisition of knowledge and skill has become one of the prime objectives for HEIs in recent years. A new relevant practice or an innovation always has a major effect upon teaching, whether methodological or technological (Salih, 2012). The objective of various teaching methodologies used in world over is simply the "effective teaching and learning". According the Ministry of Education, New Zealand (2007) there is no formula that will guarantee learning for every student in every context. However, there is extensive, well-documented evidence about the kinds of teaching approaches that consistently have a positive impact on student learning. This evidence tells us that students learn best when teachers:

- create a supportive learning environment
- encourage reflective thought and action
- enhance the relevance of new learning

- facilitate shared learning
- make connections to prior learning and experience
- provide sufficient opportunities to learn
- inquire into the teaching–learning relationship

In Oman, faculty comes from different eastern and western countries of the world with diverse teaching experience; therefore the teaching methodology is also different in different institutes and across the different courses. Thus, there is mixed teaching methodology. Usually the mixture of all kinds of methodology including case studies methods, project based learning, class room teaching, assignment base methods are used in Oman. It has been observed that teaching methodology / pedagogy is thus not a barrier in the way of acquisition of knowledge and skills. Students learn better when they are active and engaged.

Curricula

Curricula play a very important role because it is not only a list of course contents but also focus on who are the learners and what are the requirements of a society (Shah and Baporikar, 2010). The fundamental purpose of curriculum development is to ensure that students receive integrated, coherent learning experiences that contribute towards their personal, academic, and professional learning and development (Flinders University, 2009). A curriculum is expected to be well and logically structured, clear and understandable both for teaching staff and students (Savic, 2007). In Oman a mix type of education sector including local and foreign HEIs has been emerged in which most of the HEIs have adopted foreign curricula. The basic question is whether the foreign curricula meet the local market need, students' understanding, and learning abilities and required skill for employment, need to be answered. In Oman less effort has been made to develop local curricula. It has been observed that the foreign curricula of Western universities used in HEIs are high than students standard. Students are unable to understand even after the completion of foundation courses. The solution is either to develop local curricula according to the level of students or there is need of further improvement in the GFP. However, this failure cannot be linked only the GFP but there is direct link with student previous education background and students attitude toward learning and acquisition of knowledge. It has been noted that students rely mostly on power point presentation to memorize and pass the exam. Course book reading and studying is a big task for them. They prefer group assignment so that to reduce their work. Thus, curricula are not a barrier in the way of acquisition of knowledge and skill but students' attitude and motivation toward hard work for higher education is a barrier.

Faculty

In most of the institutions faculty is expatriate with international experience and exposure. Most of them do have PhD in their subjects but due to student teacher ratio which is high, the hand holding which the local students need both in terms of subject inputs, language and academic behaviour does affect the quality of teaching and learning. In addition terms of appointment being contractual and usually for a short period of 2 years, lack of research support and academic environment, language problems, communication and cultural aspects also have their bearing on the student-teacher relationship.

Infrastructure / Facilities / Policies / Strategies / Rules

Infrastructure and facilities are in line with most of the developed countries but professional approach to put them to best use is sometimes lacking. Policies regarding Omanisation also effect to some extent. The strategies and rules are inline with the local requirements and though they are well defined there is lack of implementation. The substance in terms of strategies, policies and rules is very much there but the spirit behind it seems to missing.

Previous Education Background

Most of the students come from local schools where the medium of instruction is mostly Arabic and the use of modern methods in terms of teaching are not in vogue. There is also lack of seriousness on the part of both – the teachers and the parents to enforce study habits, which really need to be inculcated during the schooling. All this including the environmental and cultural factors, like students staying in remote areas or not having literate parents do result in having poor or no previous educational background.



Preparation for Higher Studies/ Learner Attitude / Individual Hard Work / Motivation

It is observed that the school level education in Oman produced/producing school graduates for higher studies which are not only weak in academics but also having no motivation toward hard work and higher education. A big gap exists between school education and higher education. To cover the gap, the HEIs under the directions of Ministry of Higher Education have started General Foundation Programme (GFP) for the period of one or two years to prepare/fit the students for higher studies. However, GFP is also unable to fill the gap despite of sufficient duration for basic courses, good contents, teaching methodology and experience faculty. Even after completion of the general foundation courses, students are unable to grasp the knowledge and skill at higher level. Resultantly, the other factors such as good teaching methodology, experience faculty, excellent infrastructure and facilities are failed to deliver the desired results.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that all the internal factors including Basic Foundation Programme teaching methodology, curricula, faculty and infrastructures have been developed fairly good in HEIs in Oman and appropriate to contribute in the acquisition of knowledge and skill of the students. However, despite of all these efforts, the literature review, personal experience and observations indicate that students are unable to acquire skills and knowledge up to the desired level. This means that a problem still exists but not in the internal factors of the HEIs but in the external factors which the students bring with themselves to the institute in the form of weak educational background from school, unprepared mindset for higher studies and attitude toward hard work. All these internal factors are the hurdles in the way internal factors to affect positively. It is recommended that the Ministry of Higher Education and HEIs in Oman focus more on the external factors of the students. The basic reasons behind students non seriousness toward higher studies is lack of competition in admission and employment and free education. Therefore, various ways should be find out for students competition in admission and employment. This means that the quality of teaching methodology, curricula, faculty and infrastructures of the HEIs in Oman have been developed so far is quite good.

One of the important factors which have not been address in the literature is the prevailing local socio culture. The students are entered in the university not only with a weak academic base / basic skill but also with low motivation mindset. Their focus is more on memorization to pass exam and get degree. Besides of all efforts to improve the quality of GFP, it is necessary to focus on those factors which change the students' mindset and motivate them toward hard work and mentally prepare them higher studies. Ideally, teaching should aim to encourage learners to develop a capacity for critical thinking and taking control over their own learning while at the same time assuming responsibility for all the decisions concerning their learning. In other words, it is no longer enough for students to sit and listen, test and forget. Learners of today need to become autonomous learners, thinkers and planners who are able to sustain learning and attain long-term success. Unfortunately, many of the current beliefs and practices in our schools and higher education institutions are not autonomy supportive. (Al-Sadi, H., 2012).

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