

Management of Private Higher Education Institutions in the Sultanate of Oman: A Call for Cooperation

Omer H. Ismail

*Department of Educational Foundations & Administration College of
Education Sultan Qaboos University Sultanate of Oman*

Abdullah M. Al Shanfari

*Department of Educational Foundations & Administration College of
Education Sultan Qaboos University Sultanate of Oman*

Abstract

In the last two decades there has been a remarkable growth of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in the Sultanate of Oman, one of the six Gulf Cooperative Council countries. This paper highlights this development, and emphasizes and calls for well-planned cooperation between higher education institutions in the country.

Keywords: Private higher education, Coordination, Sultanate of Oman.

Introduction

Private higher education in Oman has, in recent decades, witnessed a rapid growth in the number of institutions; it has become a significant part of the higher education system in the country. This growth is due to the dependence on private higher education institutions (PHEIs) to satisfy market needs and meet the demands of secondary school graduates for higher education that the public institutions have not and do not meet.

However, in spite of their contribution in providing educational opportunities, PHEIs should do more than just satisfy a demand and admit students to provide them with university education. They can also play an active role in sustainable development in the region, and increase awareness with respect to issues such as human rights, ethics and values, democratization, peace and globalization.

To play their role and meet the apparent expectations of the country and its people, PHEIs in Oman need effective, not negative, competition and collaboration. They need to work closely together and with public institutions in order to overcome any challenges or constraints they face in reaching their full potential.

Given current opportunities and challenges, this paper discusses these and the associated needs and calls for the establishment of organizations at state level that foster inter-university cooperation. If such organizations existed one could be optimistic about the future of PHEIs in the Oman.

Character of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Oman

Until recently, it has been the government's responsibility to provide free higher education to all Omani citizens. Established in 1986, Sultan Qaboos University was the first and only university in Oman to provide this. Although PHE in Oman is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is expanding rapidly because the demand for university places has greatly exceeded government provision (Al-Iamki, 2006).

Private higher education sector in Oman has a number of characteristics:

The first is continuing quantitative growth. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of PHEIs, due to the demand for higher educational opportunities. As table (1) below shows, there are now 26 private universities and colleges in the Sultanate.

This demand was created for two main reasons. The first was the influx of students from secondary schools. Since 1970 to date, the period of national development, priority has been given to investment in basic education. Consequently, free basic education has been made available to all Omani nationals under a program of continuous and rapid expansion across the whole country. Thus a large population of secondary school graduates began to compete for limited opportunities in public higher education institutions in the country. As Al-lamki (2002) reported, the expansion of general education resulted in large numbers of high school graduates who created demand for higher education opportunities. Thus the greatest challenge faced by the government has been the widening gap between the increasing number of graduates from the secondary school system and the limited number of places available at institutions of public higher education in the Sultanate.

The second cause has been the dependence on the private sector in providing educational opportunities. In response to the disparity between basic and post-secondary education, a Royal Decree was issued in 1996 to promote the development of private higher education colleges in the country. To encourage the private sector to assume a role in the education sector, the government initiated subsidy schemes. These schemes include provisions for loans with subsidized interest rates and the allocation of government-developed lands for the construction of educational institutions. Private investors have been given the opportunity to establish new private universities and colleges in the Sultanate and offered a number of incentives (Al-Lamki, 2006). This privatization also indicates a trend or shift from the provision of higher education solely by the state to sharing this responsibility with private investors.

Thus, the government paved the way to the private sector participating in the provision and development of higher education in Oman; and as a result the number of private colleges and universities has 'mushroomed'. Currently there are seven private universities and nineteen colleges. All are considered commercial institutions; all of them have academic affiliation agreements with universities in other countries with international links. For example, Sohar University is affiliated with University of Queensland, Australia; Oman Medical College is affiliated with West Virginia University; and Caledonian College of Engineering is affiliated with Glasgow Caledonian University, UK. The programs offered cover different areas of specialization, such as Business, Engineering, and Information Technology. All of which meet the needs of the job market.

Table 1: Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman

No	Institute	Year Established
1	Sohar University	2001
2	Nizwa University	2004
3	Dhofar University	2004
4	Arab Open University – Oman Branch	2007
5	The German University of Technology in Oman	2007
6	University of Buraimi	2010
7	A'Sharqiyah University	2010
8	Majan College	1995
9	Modern College of Business & Science	1996
10	Caledonian College of Engineering	1996
11	Al-Zahra College for Girls	1999
12	Mazoon College	1999
13	Oman Medical College	2001
14	Sur University College	2001
15	Waljat College of Applied Sciences	2001
16	Middle East College of Information Technology	2002
17	Al Buraimi University College	2003

Table 1: Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman – continued

18	Scientific College Design	2004
19	Oman College of Management & Technology	2004
20	Gulf College	2004
21	Muscat College	1997
22	International College of Engineering and Management	1998
23	Oman Tourism and Hospitality Academy	2001
24	International Maritime College Oman	2005
25	Bayan College	2006
26	Oman Dental College	2006

A notable feature of these institutions is the dominance of American university models as a standard. Since the 1990s, the higher education systems in all Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries have witnessed the establishment of foreign and, in particular, branches of Western universities. Romani, (2009) noted that two-thirds (around 70) of the new universities founded in the Arab Middle East since 1993 are private, and more and more (at least 50 to date) of them are branches of Western, mainly American, universities. He stated that political leaders in the Gulf, by founding world-class, top-ranking universities:

Seek not just to close the “development gap” in their countries; they explicitly intend to reverse the balance of knowledge between the West and the Middle East. Their aim is to change the Arab academe from a site for knowledge reception to one of knowledge production.

Ghabra and Arnold (2007) also observed that the new colleges and universities closely follow Western curricula, textbooks, and academic requirements. Furthermore, in order to strengthen the credibility of these efforts, these institutions have often forged alliances with American, British, Australian, and Canadian universities.

There has also been a concentration on less expensive specializations and fields of study. This has resulted in a mismatch between university graduates and the labor market. By graduating students mainly in theoretical fields, the HEIs will create more problems than they are intended to solve.

Challenges Facing Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman

The choices facing HEIs in the current environment are many and complex. For example, institutions that formerly had a teaching focus must now develop a research focus; those that traditionally had a concern with only their domestic market must now also consider international markets. In addition, HEIs are under pressure to collaborate for the purposes of both teaching and research and with a view to compensating for institutional weaknesses (Fahy and et al, 2009). These dangers have been highlighted by the World Bank: Education systems have a tendency to spawn a new set of challenges for every problem resolved. Once everyone is in school, we must make sure that they do not drop out. Once they remain seated, we must make sure that they learn something. Once they appear to be ready to learn, we must make sure that the material is useful for their future and ours. World Bank (2008)

Weber (2008) identified some of the changes currently affecting higher education and research systems. These changes are: the increasing competition for talented teachers and students at national and international levels; the increasing cost of research and of training graduate and doctoral students; and the over-regulation and under-funding of higher education and research by governments. These make it difficult for institutions to make strategic changes.

The major challenges facing Private Higher education in Oman can be identified. The first is the mismatch between the output of PHEIs and the job market, and the associated need to open new diverse disciplines with regional dimensions. The PHEIs need to pay attention to and focus on the more difficult task of opening new programs in the fields of applied sciences. High school graduates want university degrees that will open the job market for them and lead to employment opportunities.

Next is the reliance on tuition fees to support all expenses and the subsequent lack of funding for research. Tuition and fees paid by students constitute the core financial basis of private institutions. The failure to meet enrolment goals or unaccounted expenses can destabilize financial budgets, and threaten the survival of an institution. Dependency on tuition fees also means dependence on students' capacity and/or willingness to pay. As a result, this could bring up major issues of equity and access to private institutions. Therefore, if not properly managed, private institutions could be instrumental in causing major divisions in class and social structures (Altbach, 2003).

The third issue is the matter of access for low-income students. There is a need to devise ways whereby all academically eligible students are given greater opportunities for higher education, to even for those who cannot afford it. The promotion of a market orientated approach in higher education by establishing private post-secondary institutions creates academic and financial challenges. Asmal, (2004) notes that the private 'for profits' institutions are not addressing the academic needs of society. They have commercialized education into a commodity that can be bought or sold in the market.

Quality assurance and accreditation is another major challenge facing private higher institutions. These rapidly evolving commercial private-enterprise educational institutions are supposed to provide quality education and to cater for the interests of students, parents, and society. Research findings show that, in general in the less developed and developing countries, where there is a lack of philanthropy and endowment practices and traditions, PHEIs are established as profit-making ventures (Asmal, 2004). Research on private higher education in most of these less developed and developing nations has also demonstrated either an absence of or poor and inadequate systems of quality assurance and accreditation. Consequently, in terms of status and quality, most of the private colleges and universities are at the lowest academic tier of the higher education system.

The fifth issue is students' recruitment and enrollment. It is estimated that all PHEIs in Oman operate at less than fifty percent (50%) capacity. Al-Lamky (2006) reported a number of reasons that contributed to this problem. The first is a preference by students to seek free public higher education in the country, and the second is for those students who have the financial means to prefer to pursue quality university education abroad. In addition, students without financial means are unable to pay tuition and fees. A fourth reason is the inadequate financial aid given to private students in the form of grants and scholarships, and the absence of a funding scheme (student loans) and associated mechanisms. Finally, there is the lack of a legal framework to promote private corporate sponsorship and tax-deductible donations.

In conclusion, the final challenge facing PHEs in Oman is the risk of failure. Regardless of the success stories to date stories, it is too early to say whether these institutions face the possibility of closure. Under the existing circumstances (such as their dependence mainly on tuition fees, their difficulties in attracting local and international students), PHEIs face high risks and the possibility of shutting down. Given the prevailing economic realities, based on cost benefit analysis and calculating profit and risks involving operational costs, merging or closing might be the only alternatives these institution face. The sustainability of these new institutions and the trends they represent remain a major concern. Furthermore, these market factors may be enhanced by weaknesses that plague these new universities, as Ghabra and Arnold (2007) noted that they suffer from:

Weak administration, poor recruiting strategies and practices, instability of faculty, corporate-style management of the university, a focus on profit, weak faculty representation

Competition

In the field of higher education, as in many other field, universities compete with other universities. In fact, there is competition within universities: schools compete with other schools and departments with other departments. However, competition between and within higher education institutions does not, and should not, lead to hostility or confrontation. Academic institutions have common goals - teaching, research and community services – and all academic activities should be directed towards the

achievement of these goals. Competition in doing so results in achieving better quality and excellence. Universities, schools and departments compete and the students and public are the judges.

Competition in higher education is a reality, but the question is how does this competition affect higher education institutions? According to Bailey, Rom and Taylor (2004)

Competition can push higher education policy in one of two different directions.

On the one hand, competition may increase spending. For private universities this would occur if they view spending as a means to attract students and prestige. On the other hand, competition may decrease spending if lower spending enhances their ability to attract students with low tuition.

A positive element of competition is its potential to promote quality. In order to compete, you have to offer programs and services of high quality. People are not interested in any type of education; they are interested in the best quality education programs and institutions that they can afford.

Coordination

Challenges faced by PHEIs require cooperation between and among them. Smit (1998) noted that universities and higher education institutions worldwide share similar problems and challenges in spite of their differences in traditions and structures.

Research has indicated that private higher education helps meet the growing demand for tertiary education, provides more opportunities to students, and creates diversification at the higher levels of education. However, it also brings with it problems of finance, quality, access and equity (Altbach, 1999 & 2003; Asmal, 2004). Private institutions face a number of challenges, one of the most important of which is that of funding. The critical difficulties faced are the source of funding and its degree of sustainability? Thus a primary challenge facing private higher education management is this issue of funding. Most of the commercial PHEIs depend heavily on student enrollment and on state (government) financial aid to students Al-Lamki, (2006).

Weber (2008) identified a number of conditions and situations in which most fruitful cases of cooperation exist. These are:-

First, when the facilities necessary to do a specific research or provide better information or new learning facilities are so enormous that they cannot be set up and run by a single institution or nation. The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, the world's largest particle physics laboratory, is an excellent example of cooperation that has become truly global. This multibillion dollar project was possible only due to the financial and scientific participation of 20 member states and to the collaboration of many others. Research, information, and learning potential are fostered by a collaboration which makes possible something that could not have been possible without collaboration.

Second, when it helps improve the critical mass of the institution or subdivision in charge of an activity, principally in allowing the sharing of cost over a larger amount of actors or beneficiaries. For example, when universities develop and run a library management system or e-courseware, the number of beneficiaries can be greatly increased with small additional costs when the cost of development or implementation is shared between a greater number of promoters.

The collaboration between two or more institutions can contribute to a better division of labor between them. By reinforcing the strong elements and reducing or eliminating the weak ones through a process of transferring responsibilities and staff between the collaborating institutions, each institution manages to focus on what they do best and to abandon to others the activities at which they were at a disadvantage.

PHEIs should rely on "cooperation" rather than competition as a tool for development. They need to share their knowledge and experiences they gain as they grow. Instead of competing for resources, they can establish an inter-university relationships and network through which they can set up policies and plans to work together to build educational institutions of quality and excellence in

Oman. This cooperation can include, but should not be limited to areas such as libraries, staff and joint funds for research work. Without such cooperation there will be doubts about the ability of PHEIs to meet the challenges they face. PHEIs in Oman should cooperate and act collectively in order to face the challenges of competition. As Weber (2008) states: “Competition is the normal state of affairs that every individual, enterprise (private or public), and nation has faced since the memory of mankind, whereas cooperation requires a voluntary decision to join forces with a partner or partners in order to improve the impact and efficiency of a specific activity”.

Some PHEIs in Oman depend largely on government support for survival and development. These are commercial institutions. What will be their future if and once the government subsidies are cut? Their existence will be open to doubt. If such questions are not answered some of these institutions may have to merge or close. To foster this cooperation a separate body (commission) should be established to act as an umbrella for all PHEIs operating in the country. The main role and responsibilities of such an establishment would be to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among the PHEIs. It should work towards effective participation in and develop a clear role for the private sector in providing quality education in Oman. It can also build relationship and collaboration between private and public HEIs. Such collaboration can be fostered, for example, in areas of research and exchange of staff and students

The PHIs could develop plans for providing financial resources for students, such as loans and scholarships. In order to have an admission policy that does not have to take into account student income and to attract a diversity of people, sources of fund must be available for those who cannot pay for their tuition. If private universities can provide access to qualified students regardless of their personal financial circumstances, they will enhance their relationships with the people and governments in the region.

Sport competitions could be organized for their students, as well as scientific and social activities and programs. The deans of student affairs could plan and implement such activities.

Plans have to be developed for joint research in areas of interest and concern. Examples of such areas include the danger of private risks (drop outs), and admission strategies. Such plans will help these private universities in playing their roles not only as teaching universities but as knowledge-producing, research and community services centers as well.

Government support needs to be created for private universities. The awareness of stakeholders needs to be increased regarding the importance of quality and accountability in the PHIs. There is need to change the widespread misconception that private universities are only money generating institutions. The public needs to understand that these universities are important and efficient institutions that have critical and important responsibilities in building for the futures of Oman.

The PHEIs should also make agreements with and develop general guidelines for regular collaboration with public (government) institutions.

Conclusions

There are growing needs and demands for higher education in Oman. The governments and people of the region welcome the involvement of the private sector in providing higher education opportunities for qualified students.

However, many challenges are facing PHEIs in Oman. In order to approach these challenges successfully, private universities need to act collectively and intelligently and to be aware of the strengths, weaknesses, successes and failures of the region's higher education system. An important question needs to be answered by all PHEIs: What collective actions need to be taken, and what choices need to be made in order to ensure that private higher education institution in Oman contribute positively to national development and meet the expectations of of the government, public and their students?

References

- [1] Al-Lamki, S. M. (2002). “Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: the challenge of access, equity and privatization”. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 24, pp 75-86.
- [2] Al-Lamki, S. M. (2006). “The Development of Private Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Perception and Analysis”. *International Journal of Private Education* 1, pp 54-77.
- [3] Altbach, P.G. (1999). “Private Prometheus: Private higher education and development in the 21st Century”. *Greenwood Press*, CT.
- [4] Altbach, P.G. (2003). “The decline of the guru: The academic profession in Developing and middle-income countries”. *Palgrave Macmillan Publisher*, New York.
- [5] Asmal, K. (2004). “Knowledge is not a product to be bought or sold: A South African perspective”. *International Higher Education*, Boston College.
- [6] Bailey, M.; Rom, M.; and Taylor, M. (2004). “State competition in higher education: A race to the top, or a race to the bottom? ”. *Economics of Governance*, 5, pp. 53–75.
- [7] Fahy, J.; Hurley, S.; Hooley, G. and DeLuca, L. (2009). “Resources, Capabilities and Competition in Higher Education”. Paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC) Conference.
- [8] Ghabra, S. and Arnold, M. (2007). “Studying the American Way: An Assessment of American-Style Higher Education in Arab Countries”. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus no. 71.
- [9] Romani, V. (2009). “The Politics of Higher Education in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects”. *Middle East Brief*, 36, pp. 1-7.
- [10] Smit, F. (June 1998). “Private education: Competitor or partner in the provision of education in South Africa”. SAIDE Open Learning through Distance Education. 4(2), SAIDE: Johannesburg.
- [11] Weber, L. (December 19, 2008). “Competition and cooperation: The need for a dual approach. *Harvard International Review*. <http://hir.harvard.edu/global-education/competition-and-cooperation>. Retrieved on Jan 10, 2014.
- [12] World Bank (2008). “The Road Not Traveled - Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa” *World Bank*, Washington, D.C.