Chapter 6

21st Century Higher Education Trends in Sultanate of Oman

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ABSTRACT

Education is all pervasive. It is rightly said that “to educate is to enlighten,” and the only way for developing either the self or the nation is through education. This is well understood in most of the developed countries, but due to globalization, the world over this realization is dawning. Sultanate of Oman is one of the most developed countries in the Middle East. Blessed with a visionary leader, the younger generation of the nation is set to achieve its full potential. Higher Education is definitely a means to achieve that end. It is one of the strategic areas pursued with intent and motive. This chapter traces the history of higher education in Oman, identifies the 21st century higher education trends, and reviews the best practices, which can be adopted for evolving a comprehensive and holistic higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, Oman has experienced a huge change in the education sector in terms of reforms, curriculum, and teaching-learning processes and students concerns. It is the result of the great vision that the Sultanate has for not just the economic growth but also for the Human resource development. This includes focusing on updating and developing the academic institutions in such a way that they could rank among distinguished institutions, attracting large number of students for enrolment. On one of the occasions while addressing the country men His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos announced that he is “intending to offer the Omani youth the opportunity not only to acquire the academic and professional skills, but also to have a capacity for original thoughts to study thoroughly and with deep concern their country’s civilization with its great historical heritage, hence education should not only be an instrument for graduating technocrats and intelligentsia, but it should give due importance to formation of personal qualities”.

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The past few years have shown that the countries in the Gulf region have taken bold steps in terms of bringing in internationalization by letting the foreign universities establish their campuses for the local students’ Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates are some of the examples of doing this successfully in the Gulf region. The challenge faced by Oman and other Gulf countries is “think global and act local.” There needs to be a balance between catering to the local needs and maintaining the standards and expectations on the international levels. It has become very difficult to decide between the importance of traditional societal mission of education and the commercialization of education. The Higher education landscape in the Gulf region is highly affected by the growth of branch campuses such as those in U.A.E. and Qatar.

We all have witnessed the advancement of knowledge society in this current decade, offering great hope and this has taken the countries towards new and extended boundaries in terms of development and shaping the society. In order to participate in the knowledge economy a different set of human skills are required and what truly matters is higher qualifications, intellectual independence, and flexibility. Higher education involves more than teaching relevant skills to students. Despite some common grounds and global uniformity in many areas of society, one can’t decide for the most appropriate system, policies and structures for higher education because the societies vary in forms and modus operandi, as the cultural diversity speaks a lot for itself and adds dynamism. The research is based on primary and secondary data. The methodology adopted is existing literature review, secondary data and in-depth observation including contextual analysis with grounded theory approach. The main objectives of this chapter are to understand the present scenario of higher education in general and Oman in particular so as to identify the emerging trends in higher education and reflect how these trends will affect higher education in Oman. Each trend builds on ideas presented in various papers, illustrating how current trends are constantly evolving and new ones are emerging.

BACKGROUND

An academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity. To comprehend this ongoing and dynamic process while being in the midst of it is not an easy task for any country, institution or individuals. Arguably, the developments of the recent past are at least as dramatic as those in the 19th century when the research university evolved, first in Germany and then elsewhere and fundamentally redesigned the nature of the university worldwide. This paper is especially devoted to examining the changes that have taken place since the 1990s in Sultanate of Oman. While many trends included are discussed in some or other reports and documents since 2000, they have intensified in the past decade. Here we examine the main engines of change and their impact on higher education. Much of these observations are concerned with the ways in which higher education has responded to the challenge of massification. The “logic” of massification is inevitable and includes greater social mobility for a growing segment of the population, new patterns of funding higher education, increasingly diversified higher education systems, generally an overall lowering of academic standards, and other tendencies. Like many of the trends addressed here, while massification is not a new phase, at this “deeper stage” of ongoing revolution in higher education it must be considered in different ways. At the first stage, higher education systems struggled just to cope with demand, the need for expanded infrastructure and a larger teaching corps. During the past decade systems have begun to wrestle with the implications of diversity and to consider which subgroups are still not being included and appropriately served.