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ECONOMICS OF PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE OF ROLE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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ABSTRACT

The Sultanate of Oman has seen a major overhaul of its traditional education system in the last decade. There is a systematic emergence of private colleges and universities in Oman, especially in Muscat. Oman's system of higher education currently includes 7 private universities and 22 colleges with an enrollment of some 40,000 students. Private colleges have entered into partnership arrangements with foreign universities to make quality international education available locally. This paper sheds light on the extent to which partnership arrangements with external university affiliations have been a catalyst to promote higher education and meet customer expectations. The Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) is rigorously conducting external reviews of private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in the Sultanate of Oman through a two stage process of institutional accreditation comprising Quality Audit and Standards Assessment. OAC's thrust has led to introduction of effective changes through total quality management (TQM). Oman's labour market is highly regulated and protected, thus ensuring bright future for students with international qualifications. However, a lot is still left to be desired from these tie-ups. It is in this context that the role of private universities in promoting higher education in Oman assumes greater significance.

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KEYWORDS

Foreign Direct Investment, Gulf-Cooperation Council, higher education, partnering, private colleges.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape in the Sultanate of Oman, a member nation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is undergoing development and transformation at an astonishing rate. Economic growth and higher disposable incomes have increased the prospects for quality education in the country. In line with the increasingly free and booming private sector, higher education has been characterised over the last few decades by exponential growth in the number of institutions and a dependence on the private sector to provide education that meets the needs of the market.

Sultanate of Oman is a big country spreading over 309,500 sq km. Politically stable and economically vibrant, Oman has made rapid progress in human resource development. It has become to be known as a country of peace, harmony and prosperity with a huge young population in the age group for higher studies. Good governance in Oman has made it necessary for the country to move on the path of progress and economic growth and higher education is the crucial part of this process.

Education has always acquired the highest attention in Oman and policy makers have made it clear that there will be no let up in this sector. To further this cause the government has made an allocation of OMR 1.3 billion in the Annual Budget of 2012, i.e. 13 percent of the total expenditure. (Oman Budget 2012)¹ Since oil and gas may exhaust within a few years, enrichment of human capital is the best substitute to natural resources of the country. Omani authorities realize this and have therefore attached particular value to reform the entire educational setup at a higher level.

Oman has lot of potential for industrial growth and its economic growth can be seen all round now. The Government has ambitious plans to spend OMR 1.8 billion on social security that would help to generate additional 36 thousand jobs in the year 2012. There is need to provide basic education to all and higher education to youth. Traditionally Oman has depended on expatriate population for unskilled, skilled and various other professional jobs but, now, Omanisation has become one area of priority. Oman is moving towards large scale industrialization and heavy FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) projects have been undertaken by national and international businesses. The Omanisation process calls for replacing the expatriates with well qualified and well trained Omanis. This can be achieved only if Oman provides higher education to its youth.

To meet future demand universities in Oman have to live up to the expectations of providing higher education. There are many business houses that have invested in this sector – by way of establishing private colleges and universities. Though, running costs turn out to be high initially but still they produce good results in the long run. The demand for private universities in the market is increasing in the fields of management, commerce, international trade, applied sciences, technology, medicine, education, ocean engineering, solar power generation, service industry, tourism, architecture, petro engineering etc. Currently the private sector is active at the university and college level and has so far set up seven private universities and twenty two higher education colleges.²

Higher education is privatized in many countries. All over the world the concept of private universities is catching up. These private universities are providing good education. In coming months and years there will be many job opportunities coming up for many specialized areas of work and profession due to economic growth in Oman. This would put demands on human resources to provide good education and well trained Omanis man power.

As the Omani nation realizes the role of private universities in higher education as an important aspect of Oman's overall economic growth, it will take the nation on the path of progress and help it to achieve the vital progress that is the need of the hour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this research paper is a description and critical analysis of what other authors have written" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, Pg. 47)

Radical changes are being made in the economy of the Sultanate of Oman. There is a greater urgency for the country to diversify its sources of income and reduce the dependency on oil revenues. Currently 46 percent of Oman's GDP comes from oil revenues.³ The government of Oman has identified investment in higher education as one of the segments to support its diversification drive. It will instill confidence and create opportunities of self-employment amongst the youth.

Until the mid 1990s, the government focused most of their attention and resources on handling the rising numbers at the primary and secondary levels. Universities in Gulf rarely date back to more than two decades. A salient feature of Oman's development policy is focusing on educating females. Strict local customs and orthodox social culture does not permit women to travel to other countries for higher education. Many students, who would normally have gone abroad to study either on scholarship or on their own funding, are staying back in Oman and seeking western - quality programmes locally.

¹ Oman Budget 2012 Commitment to the "Vision 2020" Oman Arab Bank (IMG)

² Ministry of Information, 2012

³ Oman Budget 2012 Commitment to the "Vision 2020" Oman Arab Bank (IMG)

The most striking feature of the rapidly evolving Gulf higher education sector is its adoption of the American or British universities' model as the standard. Many British, American, German and Australian universities have set up their degree programmes in the Gulf. Currently, in Oman there is growing debate about the emerging role of universities in delivering professional and vocational education and the worthiness of utility of university research in all facets of business, society, invention and innovations (Hager and Hyland, 2003). Ministry of Higher Education's vision for 8th Five Year Plan (2011-2015) is to align high quality education with the job market. It emphasises strategic planning at both the institutional and system levels. Main concern is that the students of today are faced with growing uncertainty and complexity when it comes to adjustment problems related to finding jobs, changes in job and contract status, global labour mobility, adaptation to their new workplace (Ghoshal and Gratton 2002; Westwood 2000; Worrell et al 2000), greater need for self employment and broader family responsibilities (IPPR, 1998; Rajan et al. 1997).

In their research Gillad Rosen and Eran Razin (2007) concluded that the efforts of the local governments to attract colleges are influenced by location. This neither indicates a shift in policy motives nor a diminishing role of the government.

Harold Silver (1999) has reviewed and discussed the nature of gradual shift towards innovation that is largely directed by the higher education institutions. Most of the Gulf countries have a single system for all types of higher education. There is an urgent need to upgrade quality assurance as envisaged by Oman Accreditation Council.

Gareth Parry (2003) highlighted a distinctive feature of the use of English in higher education. It has an uncertain and ambiguous role of furthering education in colleges as providers of undergraduate courses. Private universities and their collaborative partners use English as a medium of higher education. Since English is not compulsorily taught as a language at the primary level in government schools in Oman, students are required to undertake foundation courses leading to IELTS (International English Language Testing System) qualification.

S.M. Al-Lamki (2002) surveyed the system of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman and examined the challenge of access, equity and privatization in light of the current predicament of a disparity between supply and demand for higher education in the Sultanate of Oman. Results indicated a lack of a consolidated system whereby a number of different ministries and government authorities are involved.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Many researches have been done on education but, only a few published researches deal with the role of private universities in promoting higher education. Development of skills is a source of employment generation and economic development. Therefore, I have chosen to write on the role of private universities and the role played by them in the development of higher education and their effect on economic development in Oman. This study will be novel and challenging, as it will deal with issues that have not been explored so far.

The research study seeks to achieve the following -

- (i) To find out the role of private universities and colleges in promoting higher education in Oman.
- (ii) To identify the specific focus areas that can be implemented by private higher education institutions in Oman.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Oman has strong geographical and historical ties with other countries in the Gulf region. Since it is a member state of GCC (Gulf-Cooperation Council) it links itself to other Arab states on a number of economic, political and educational cooperation agreements.

The different levels of cooperation provide the country with an avenue for evidence that cooperation also exists in the field of education. Regular exchanges occur in the field of experience and expertise in the development of human resources and conducting of research in the field of education. A particular mention should be made of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO), which prepared a vision for the future of education in the Arab world.

Higher education is considered as "one of the thrust areas of Arab co-operation in education" (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002 p58).

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), inspired by "a vision for the future of education in the Arab world", suggests a number of policies for expanding and improving education in the region concerned, including the following (UNDP and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. 2002) :

- (i) Promoting the concept of self-education
- (ii) Diversifying educational system and continuous updating of syllabus
- (iii) Incorporating benefits from modern education technology and information and communication technologies (ICT)
- (iv) Continuous content evaluation of education
- (v) Teacher centred renewal
- (vi) Developing an innovative education administration capable of leading the process of renewal
- (vii) Effective participation of various societal groups in learning
- (viii) Developing policies and putting them into action.

Documents related to Oman's "Vision 2020", the long term plan drawn up in 1995 for sustainable development covering next 25 years contains specific policies concerning education inspired by the following statement of the Ministry of Education (Al Belushi, Al Adawi & Al Ketani 1999):

*"The challenges facing Oman, particularly the need of self-sufficiency and the need to diversify the economy and keep pace with technological change, require new educational goals to prepare Omanis for life and work in the new conditions created by the modern global economy. These will require a high degree of adaptability and a strong background in mathematics and science in order to independently apply rapidly changing technologies to Oman's needs. The proposed educational reforms are designed to achieve the knowledge and mental skills and attitudes that young Omanis will need to learn and adapt to the very different future most of them will face."*⁴

The above excerpt from the Vision 2020 document inspires following objectives –

- (i) Improvement in standards of education at all levels
- (ii) Focus on science based curriculum
- (iii) Improve teaching of English language in basic education
- (iv) Aligning teaching methodologies to the emerging trends in the field of education

DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In Oman private higher education is formalized and regulated by a number of Royal Decrees and Ministerial Decisions i.e. Royal Decrees 41/99 and 42/99 which regulate the establishment of private Higher Education Institutions; and Ministerial Decision 36/99, an executive bylaw for implementing these two Royal Decrees. Similarly, Royal Decree 67/2000 is designed to further regulate private sector activities in Higher Education and to encourage effective and positive contributions.

As per the Ministry of Higher Education statistics, Oman's system of higher education currently includes seven private universities and twenty-two private colleges with an enrollment of some 40,000 students. In addition, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the Sultan of Oman has endowed a Royal grant of RO 17 million for Omani-owned private universities. So far, this grant has been awarded to Sohar University, Dhofar University, Nizwa University, Buraimi University,

⁴ "Oman Vision 2020" document

and Sharqiyah University, for construction of facilities and for equipment directly related to improving the quality of education.⁵ The following Tables I and II show the list of private universities and colleges in Sultanate of Oman -

TABLE I: LIST OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN OMAN

S No	Name	Website address
1	A'Sharqiya University	www.asu.edu.om
2	Dhofar University	www.du.edu.om
3	Sohar University	www.soharuni.edu.om
4	University of Buraimi	www.uob.edu.om
5	University of Nizwa	www.unizwa.edu.om
6	The German University of Technology	www.gutecg.edu.om
7	Arab Open University	www.aouoman.org
Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman		

TABLE II: LIST OF PRIVATE COLLEGES IN OMAN

S No	Name	Website address
1	Al-Buraimi University College	www.buc.edu.om
2	Al-Zahra College for Women	www.zahracol.edu.om
3	Bayan College	www.bayancollege.edu.om
4	Caledonian College of Engineering	www.cce.edu.om
5	ELS Language Centers	www.elsoman.com
6	International College of Engineering and Management	www.icemoman.com
7	Institute of Public Administration	http://www.ipa.gov.om/
8	International Maritime College Oman	www.imcoman.net
9	Majan University College	www.majancollege.edu.om
10	Mazoon College	www.mazooncollege.edu.om
11	Middle East College for Information Technology	www.mecit.edu.om
12	Modern College of Business and Science	www.mcbs.edu.om
13	Muscat College	www.mctcollege.com
14	Oman Dental College	www.omandentalcollege.org
15	Oman Medical College	www.ome.edu.om
16	Oman Tourism College	www.otc.edu.om
17	Polyglot Institute Oman	www.polyglot.org
18	Rusayl Institute	www.rioman.org
19	Sur University College	www.suc.edu.om
20	The Scientific College of Design	www.scd.edu.om
21	Waljat College of Applied Sciences	www.waljatcolleges.edu.om
22	Gulf College	www.gulfcollegeoman.com
Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman		

The Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman is trying to enhance human capabilities by creating a strong synergy between education and the socio-economic system. Scholarship programmes for Omani students studying abroad are being expanded. Currently, the Ministry of Higher Education offers 60 full scholarships and 83 partial ones for study abroad in key fields such as engineering, medicine and technology. There are almost 200 scholarships being offered by other ministries, different private firms and friendly countries to Omani students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For purpose of this study secondary data based on both quantitative and qualitative information are used in descriptive and explanatory research. The research includes three main sub-groups of secondary data i.e. documentary data, survey-based data and those compiled from multiple sources.

The sources accessed comprise various news magazines and articles, white papers on the subject available in the Ministry of Higher Education special reports, relevant books, journals and publications available in text or on the web in and outside Oman.

PRIVATISATION AS THE SOLUTION

The emergence of the concept of private universities in Sultanate of Oman is a relatively recent market orientation phenomenon. This is evident as a shift in policy from traditional education system. Throughout its history, Oman has had a non-formal educational system. Modern educational system came into being only in 1970 under the wise guidance of H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani, 1999). In 1970 there were only three formal schools with an enrolment of 900 students in the whole country.⁶

Privatization of education is also viewed as a means of ensuring quality of instruction and the relevance to market needs that have been missing from public universities. Private institutions are becoming in tune with the needs of the private sector, thereby guaranteeing courses of study of international standard leading to employment.

The research conducted by reviewing the literature available has brought to notice a few things that are very important to note. Pedagogy and education should be a part of university curriculum. The role played by private universities and colleges assumes significance due to the following reasons -

- To bridge the employment gap between expatriates and local Omani nationals, the government has embarked upon increasing Omanisation – the percentage of Omanis in the labour force. This would help to increase productivity and contribution to GDP.
- Dependence of oil revenues cannot continue forever. Oman has to diversify its sources of income and develop its human skills so that citizens can play a greater role in the nation building.
- Private universities can help to enhance human capabilities that in turn can lay the foundation for Oman's international competitiveness.
- Educated citizens can take part in the democratic process and uphold the cultural heritage while simultaneously equipped with science and technology.
- Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is the largest producer of oil and gas in Oman. It is undertaking huge investments onshore and offshore in drilling and oil exploration. To complement the large scale investments private universities can help to educate and train required manpower.

⁵ <http://mohe.gov.om>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Oman

- (vi) Oman is an attractive destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Foreign Direct Investment inflows into the Sultanate almost doubled to around RO 800 million in the year 2011, up from RO 413 million in 2010⁷ Private universities can provide higher education to meet the demands of employment in this sector.
- (vii) The contribution of tourism to GDP could rise up to 13 percent by 2020. To meet the demands of this sector private universities and colleges can provide education to youth.
- (viii) Increase in oil prices have indirectly led to more consumerism in Oman. Higher disposable incomes have led to increase in consumer spending. To handle such large scale consumerism –managerial skills, accountancy, understanding of economies and economies of scale, international trade, various industries is required. This can be done only if higher education is provided to the youth.
- (ix) Sohar is the focus of Oman's industrial growth. Diversified projects worth more than \$12 billion are in different stages of development. Aromatics complex, poly propylene plant, methanol and fertilizer projects, aluminum smelters, steel plants, refinery – all these projects are here to stay. At present the professionals to work in these projects are mainly expatriates. If right step is taken now to train and educate Omani youth for higher studies it will be the right thing to do for future and Oman's economic growth. Private universities can play a very important role to produce professionals for future.
- (x) Oman's International Container Terminal and other port development projects will very soon see Oman as hub of shipping industry. There is need to provide education for nautical studies which can be done by private universities and colleges.
- (xi) Oman has a very big coast line and in near future the off shore rigs and oil well explorations will become a reality. Now is the time to provide higher education in ocean engineering.
- (xii) The industrial and economic growth will put pressures on power generation capacity and this would be one more area where related engineering subjects can be taught. Harnessing solar and wind energy will be one more area of interest for studies due to untapped resources.
- (xiii) Oman is a big country and its mineral resources are yet to be tapped. There is need for carrying out geological surveys to find out resources of minerals. Mining engineering is yet another area which can be included in university curriculum for further needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) The government should promote the setting up of private universities in such a way that all international tie-ups are linked and customized to Oman's labour market conditions.
- (b) Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) should be more proactive in auditing the quality of the courses taught and their usefulness to the stakeholders.
- (c) Private colleges should invite academic faculty from other countries so that they can share their expertise to improve the skills of Omani youth.
- (d) The number of scholarships for deserving students should be increased to encourage the students to work hard.
- (e) The private universities should work out new international affiliations and acquire International accreditation of Education particularly from USA/Europe for specific fields of study.

CONCLUSION

Private universities can be conveniently established to provide special courses for higher education. There are several other areas where attention can be paid to create higher education courses and curriculum, syllabi...etc. Though, initial cost of setting up private universities and colleges can be high but in the long run it would help in generating well educated youth. This youth would become human resource asset of future and will contribute towards economic growth of Oman. The private universities can make a very big contribution. These centers of education can make big contribution, therefore, there is need to establish private universities.

In developed countries knowledge economies have focused on higher education. Higher education leads to development of skills which play a great role in the developments of the GDP of any country. The availability of educational infrastructure like colleges, teachers and availability of internationally recognized courses play an important role in attracting students and gives some peace of mind to those who are interested in pursuing their studies in the country.

When we take a glance at the development of education in the Sultanate of Oman, it is clear that throughout its 32 years of educational progress, the country has undoubtedly achieved 'the march of knowledge'. To harvest the fruits further, the Sultanate needs to attract investments in private universities to promote higher education. This will be helpful in converting the country's economy into knowledge economy.

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