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# TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAS, EUROPE AND ASIA AND PIECING TOGETHER THE KEY SUCCESS FACTORS AND TOXIC BLIND CORNERS

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## Abstract

The main thrust of this research was to contribute to theory building in the Theory of Higher Education (PPT) and their applicability in Oman and globally looking at the broader issues of students, academic work, and the place for higher education in society. The research explored gaps in knowledge regarding this theory as a contribution to knowledge, and in this instance, the Oman 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 barrier is anything that prevents the system from achieving its goal like getting enough students, doing academic work 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, quality, graduate employability and suitability for industry. The main objective of this research was to contribute to theory building in the Theory of Higher Education and identify critical success factors. 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 main findings were that lack of practicals/diverse teaching methods, lack of compulsory internship, unfair assessment, balancing classes with free time, the need for diversity in terms of faculty, uncommitted students, incompetent faculty, outdated syllabus, students from high schools not being college ready, graduates not matching industry requirements were the main issues.

**Keywords** Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Assessment, Examinations, Accreditation, Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Quality Assurance.

## INTRODUCTION

Global HEIs have done a lot to develop countries, 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. The Deloitte Center for Government Insights (2024)

said there were some key trends shaping higher education regardless of any country and there were:

- The outcomes era: where HEI must articulate a value proposition and eliminate inequality, facilitate access and restore public trust which is quite low.
- Who will be president? The president's job has become to complicated and multifaceted.
- A new playing field: College athletics is shifting toward increased professionalism due to new policies and practices.
- The future of AI in higher education: HEI had to embrace disruptive innovation which is as good as the industrial revolution.
- The rising influence and risks of public-private partnerships: these partnerships have revolutionised higher education and dictating how institutions function, innovate and deliver value.

Oman and the GCC have to watch these trends carefully and manage them well for better HEI.

Al-Saiari (2023) outlined the challenges faced by Oman higher education as moderate degree of readiness, challenges with styles of teaching, the learning environment and human resources, and recommended how to handle student issues, lecturers, curriculum, and industrial and international cooperation for better HEI in Oman. As one explores this massive literature review one comes across the same issues in developed countries also, the difference being the magnitude and prescriptive measures. Higher education educators were experiencing challenges and increasing pressure to ensure that graduates were employable. Some speculated that the lack of the right employment skills could contribute even more to the increase in unemployment, than does the global recession. The researcher agrees with

this.

My research paper looks at the USA, Europe and Asia higher education as drivers 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 Theory of Higher Education Management (THEM) and tries to find the place for these three continents in higher education management. This theory proffers that good well managed higher education 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 gap in knowledge here is why these key issues continued in globally when they were 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 continents's economy and society. Very instructive statistics were published by Statistica giving the status of education for men and women, boys and girls and other statistics, (Statistica, 2024), (<https://www.statista.com/topics/7785/education-worldwide/#statisticChapter>). The researcher extensively used these statistics in this research as they were quite instructive in building a case, besides many other sources used. You would see the share of tertiary education amongst males and females, and literacy rates in different regions of the world and the reasons thereof. Are higher education institutions in USA, Europe and Asia not having leadership challenges as the rest of the corporate sector and governments do naturally at times? One American professor said some universities suffered the crisis of leadership failure and position drunkenness. He sighted the large number of University Presidents (VCs in other

countries) who are forced out of their jobs for incompetence, position drunkenness or positional abuse, corruption and abuse of public office before their contracts expire. This was fact. This phenomenon leads someone not to listen to colleagues in the management team, which provided checks and balances, and to fly the said Icarat Paradox high in the sky and then fall to hell on the ground. This was a common problem for many leaders in any position be it in HEI, the corporate world or government.

The job of the faculty has never been easy and was now multi-tasked. The faculty must be a sociologist/anthropologist who understands society and cultural realities. He/she must fully understand the politics and national ethos of any country they work in, which means understanding history, national development plans and priorities and avoiding political minefields. It is not only one's classroom interactions with students and other faculty that can get faculty into trouble but could be other external factors mentioned above as universities draw in many issues from the communities, industry, government and wider societies naturally. Being a good teacher was no longer enough, but also understanding society, sociology, anthropology, politics and economics too. Faculty have to wear all these hats.

### **STUDENT ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Diversity of life experiences and opinions enriched the educational experience, while confronting differences can be uncomfortable, but can contribute significantly to learning and a future working life, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:77). Higher education attainment was associated with better health, higher employment rates, and higher relative earnings, besides higher proficiency on skills such as literacy and numeracy, (Bowen and McPherson, 2016:12). The USA system of higher education did not arise from a plan and no agency governed it, it just happened and the USA made the

top ten universities in rankings except Oxford and Cambridge, 146 of the top 500, 52 of the top 100, and 32 of the top 50, (Labaree, 2017: 2;5). College served as a turning point in the lives of almost everyone and was a time and place where people learnt how to better fit into the world and create a meaning for their lives, (Selingo, 2013:168). By any measure college graduates led healthier and longer lives, had better working conditions, had healthier children who performed better in school, had more of an interest in art and reading, spoke and wrote more clearly, had a greater acceptance of differences in people, and were more civically active and the same attributes passed down to future generations, (Selingo, 2013:169). The University of Phoenix was the largest in the USA, University of California Berkley was the USA and world's best research university while Harvard was rated best in the world and University of Wisconsin was the best entrepreneurial university in the world, (Clawson & Page, 2011:8-13). The effects of austerity on HEI were laid clearly by Altbach (2016:52-54) when he said the implications were low salaries for the academic profession and others working in higher education, many graduates were deemed unemployable and there was an overall deterioration in the quality of higher education. Austerity started in 2008 after the global financial crisis.

The learning college would reflect that student learning and the assessment of that learning was central to the mission of the college, its philosophy, its values, and the identity of the institution, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:20), quoting Blaich and Wise, 2010; Cistone and Bashford, 2002; Dwyer, Millet and Payne, 2006. Assessment was a difficult exercise which decided the fate of students, their future and their families and had too many interest groups like students, their parents/families, society, employers, government, and the college administration who are naturally concerned about pass rates and backlash from

students as customers for future uptake. Marks and marking is a high stakes game with many interest groups, i.e. colleges, students, teachers, society, government, accreditation bodies, professional bodies and industry.

In the world today it was a fact that having a diploma or degree (some credential, qualification), was now a prerequisite to getting married. A new middle class elite had emerged which did not want to marry a girl without a diploma or degree. So failure meant a girl might not be married or would be relegated to being married by someone of a lower social class or grade, naturally a person without a degree or diploma, which might mean relegation to a lower social standing or a lower income family or marriage, as in most of the times lack of qualifications resulted in doing lower level or menial jobs and unquestionable poverty. Some few people might be lucky though and still be rich from inheritance or business, even without qualifications, but that was definitely a tiny minority. So, failure to get qualifications had serious social and economic ramifications. Sometimes the rest of the family would be having college qualifications and for one not to get it would be quite traumatizing as one would not fit in the family psychologically and life would be like a lifelong psychosomatic prison. Pressure from family and in-group for achievement was a real issue. Qualifications and good jobs allowed people to drive poshy executive cars, buy good houses and mansions, enjoy the best hotels and restaurants, enjoy the best holiday resorts, be treated at the best hospitals in and outside the country, join exclusive clubs, send children to the best schools, join boards of leading companies and government corporations, join Chambers of Commerce and Industry, be consulted on important issues at company and national level as well as family and community level, become an opinion leader and to avoid the dreaded scourge and curse of poverty, which is every person's fear nowadays.

The uneducated man/woman faced the opposite of that and lived the life of deprivation, tears, misery and ridicule. Nobody ever wanted that no matter what. Education was the unquestionable panacea to the middle class and the contest for the middle class was via colleges and credentials then lucrative jobs with top level decision making, dignity and respect for life. The researcher had one unforgettable experience whilst in the UK, when one local driver was wishing he had a PhD degree and said, "I wish there was a PhD in driving then I would be enjoying life like all these professors, earning a lot of money and benefits." It was true the professors were some of the highest paid people in any society who splashed their money in supermarkets, bought or rented expensive executive houses, visited expensive holiday resorts and owned poshy cars, among many luxuries they could afford. It was the same pattern in hospitals. People loved education so much and there was an education crazy and frenzy in every country.

A study on helping students achieve self-regulated learning (SRL) skills was done to a pilot group of twenty eight students studying Financial Accounting in a South African School of Accountancy and qualitative data was collected in the form of written and verbal feedback from group participants, colleagues, and through use of a research diary, (Wilmot & Merino, 2015:n.p). The findings indicated that guided mastery and active learning were effective techniques for teaching specific SRL skills to students. The feedback provided by students also showed that the intervention fostered student learning. The researcher's own teaching practice also improved through reflecting on and making changes to his teaching approach. HEI teachers could learn a few lessons from these findings and reduce lecturing and move to student centred learning.

### **ACADEMIC ISSUES**

Good colleges have a responsibility to faculty

growth and maximizing the potential of faculty, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:21).

Former Harvard University President, Charles Elliot, discovered three critical factors for the success of universities and nations, (Christensen and Eyring, 2011:48) which were:-

- a. In Europe at the time (19th Century), there was the broad range and high degree of specialization of European scholarship, and France and Germany excelled in a number of disciplines;
- b. The second discovery was the apparent connection between scholarship and national economic productivity. He saw that the increase in imported European goods he had seen at home was the result of scientific discoveries being translated into commercial practice; and lastly
- c. Despite all the superiority in scholarship and industry, the individual citizens of France and Germany suffered at the hands of undemocratic governments, rigid class structures, and exclusionary school systems. He gained increased appreciation of democratic liberty in America and beyond. His own rise to academic prominence as well as that of his family politically, financially and scholarly in USA would not have been possible back in Europe.

Higher education had become the basic education of the knowledge economy. Yet in transitioning, emerging and developing countries, resources for higher education, and indeed higher educational systems themselves, remained inadequate, (Alon & McIntyre, 2013: 5-27). Urgent action was needed to expand and diversify the supply of educational avenues to meet the fast rising demand. That review paper, based on the ongoing research of the authors, defined business education as the collection of skills and abilities given by the business disciplines and enabling the development of an entrepreneurial society. They contended that the institutionalisation of world-class

management programmes to produce a continuous and self-renewing stream of intellectual capital and its retention in the emerging economies of the world was possibly the most significant challenge faced by business and management education in the coming generation. Crow and Dabars (2015:160-161) contributing to this debate argued that discovery, learning and societal engagement were mutually supportive core functions of universities. They went further to say knowledge transfer occurred through publications, training and education of students, employment of graduates, conferences, consultations/consultancy, collaborations with industry, government and society as well as obtaining rights to inventions and discoveries that qualify for patent protection (intellectual property, or IP) and licensing them to private enterprises.

Competition for attention was so crude universities had to use advanced marketing strategies to get students, research funding, collaborative arrangements with industry, graduate employment and to get the ear of government and investors. Lowell of Harvard University after World War 1, explored the freedom of professors to speak according to conscience in two realms:- the classroom and the world beyond it but said they had to do that responsibly and carefully to protect their institutions and themselves, (Christensen & Eyring, 2011:94). GCC professors had achieved quite a number of accolades globally, although research funding continued to be an issue of concern.

The challenge in American education was that the public expect universities to successfully graduate all students who enter universities yet the public school systems found it difficult to produce college-ready graduates which complicates this conflict. Any university that gave these high risk students an opportunity to study then encounters



criticism because not enough of them graduate, (Lombardi, 2013:26). This was a very tricky situation for universities. Society and governments, rightly or wrongly, argue that so much has been invested in students right from kindergarten up to high school, and these lower graded students cannot just be left to sit at home or join industry at lower levels as labourers or operatives, when they could be nurtured to enable them to contribute at a higher level to national development, their lives and communities. This was a highly controversial issue with few solutions.

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>). This includes salaries for academics there too and would outcompete rivals in the GCC.

But how could one push up salaries and job security when there was a crisis in HEI in countries like 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>).

On the other extreme companies will be arguing that they wanted the best graduated students as employees as the basis of their competitiveness is firstly determined by the quality of the labourforce. The elitist top companies set high GPA and passes as minimum standards for graduate trainees which the lower GPA students naturally cannot achieve. The question then which lingers in every person's mind is – where will these lower performers work even after allowing them into colleges/universities? A new unemployment problem haunts these lower grade graduate students, sometimes for life. They hop from one interview to another being rejected and failing,

that is if they manage to be shortlisted at all. Some firms disqualify them at shortlisting stage. So, academics and others would always ask whether admitting them in colleges had any benefit or value as most of them struggled to get jobs as a norm. Off course some are well connected and easily got jobs after graduation ahead of high fliers because of cronyism called Wasta in Arabic. This was very common in the GCC. This American scenario may be found in some countries too as the same modus operandi is used in private colleges/universities who do not get state funding. They cannot get scholarships either due to their low GPA. But many of the lower GPA students do excel after college no doubt. The socialization they get in colleges does sharpen and transform them a lot. Some end up with PhD degrees, not uncommon.

Education could only be improved through: smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, longer school years, more computers in classrooms, allowing students and their parents to choose their schools and better facilities, (Best, 2011:42-43). He argued further that children raised from upper income families always did better than those from poor families because they had better educated parents who viewed school as especially important and who could give their children a host of experiences, encouragement and opportunities that improved their chances of doing well in school. He said the opposite was the case for poor parents who have less or no books, computers, less money and no special experiences. This all works against good school and college performance and results.

Students faced many challenges nowadays like:- high tuition fees, high student loan debt, failure to repay loans for education and weak employment prospects for graduates. Mettler (2014:189) criticized class sizes saying they had swelled and classes were being taught by adjunct or temporary faculty and there was less support for students

which was now affecting graduation rates downwards. Where was the solution for all the myriad of problems facing students and society? Some of the pressure was piled on academics to find out solutions, some impossible because of circumstances and reality, some possible to solve.

### **TOO MANY PHD DEGREE HOLDERS AND LESS JOBS**

The USA reported that unemployment amongst PhDs was now very high and that was a barometer of the reality in the whole world. The major cause of this was the mass production of PhD degree holders. One USA professor gave a very dawning bleak outlook of the PhD unemployment scenario as it is. He said it was now much easier to go to paradise or heaven than to get a job in academia. This was not overstating it but reality. The jobs were too few versus the massive number of PhDs available and graduating, and it was now more of a closed market where one gets jobs from the network rather than straight recruitments (your own PhD university or industry network). Using a network or headhunting had one big advantage of screening undesirable characters. Those were people who were known and would not come and cause problems and chaos upon recruitment, like conflicts, disrespect and eccentric behaviour. Many universities have suffered as a result of this. Labour laws were so tight such that dismissing any employee was not easy at all, quite traumatizing and costly, sometimes at the Labour Courts. Universities just like other employers and industries, wanted amenable team players rather than fanatics and eccentric characters who wasted valuable time in conflicts and chaos, sometimes causing other employees stress and depression, including leaders of higher education like HODs, Deans and the VC (absents, conflicts, incompetence, mistreating students and other staff).

If one looks at how long a PhD degree holder serves

it gives a glimpse of the problem. Academics normally serve up to 70 years in the field then bow out. But some in Europe and USA continue beyond that as long as they are in good health. Their skills are so important to all countries that governments want them to continue serving to help drive HEI and to do consultancy in industry, research, and skills transfer and training of junior and middle-level academics. Their presence also gives solid psychological assurance to students and other stakeholders that the best brains are here to serve you. It was also a very strong branding and marketing strategy for universities which attracted students, investors, donors and funders alike. These mature seasoned academics are the custodians of their rich globe-trotting history spanning the whole world, unique tested superior knowledge, institutional memory, superior brainpower, superior research capabilities, superior knowledge and societal problem solutions reside in them at the highest levels. Every university needs them for objectivity, checks and balances and credibility. Only those without a full understanding of this complex industry would not have these senior seasoned academics on campus. Without these senior academics a university is like a roofless house and mansion, untenable and risky. Goldstein and Holden (2010:151) quote two leading authorities on universities, starting with the philosopher Alfred North White who said that universities created the future, while Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, said that universities created the future in two fundamental ways, which was by educating those to whom the future belonged, and by generating the ideas and discoveries that could transform the present and build a better world. This was undeniable.

Looking at academic jobs localization in Saudi Araba, the GCC gigantic economy, it was reported that one regularly saw expatriate academics from 3rd world or developing countries and Asian countries who had been terminated running from

college to college to try and get a fresh new contract and avoid going back home to face a cruel harsh economy where thanklessly low salaries and benefits are paid (electricity, internet and water supply were regularly disrupted), where infrastructure was so poor and corruption was the order of the day, even in NICs (in some countries there might be wars, hyperinflation, political unrest and conflict, which would be a threat to life). Surely who would question anything given and offered by an employer when coming from those trouble spots and troubled economies?

Quality of life mattered all the time.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives were:

- a. Exploring global historical perspectives of global HEI and issues faced.
- b. Identify challenges faced globally on the same issues.
- c. Scientifically find out the magnitude of those issues globally.
- d. Advance research-driven solutions for a progressive global HEI system that addresses key success factors fully.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

These are:

- a. What are the global historical perspectives of global HEI and issues faced?
- b. What are the challenges faced globally on the same issues?
- c. Scientifically what is the magnitude of those issues globally?
- d. What are the research-driven solutions for a progressive global HEI system that addresses key success factors fully?

### **SOCIETAL ISSUES AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Higher education was humanity's primary enabler,

its principal path on curing diseases, advancing technology, enhancing communication, creating decent communities, making transportation safer, and even predicting the weather, appreciating beauty, inspired by creativity, understand our past, discern the consequences of our politics, comprehend, respect, and transcend difference, made sense of our emotions and assess our values, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:4). A free modern society and economy required a culture protecting and inspiring individuality, imagination, understanding and self-expression that drives a nation's indigenous innovation, Antony, Cauce & Shalala (2017:5), quoting Edmund Phelps.

Students were at the heart of the university, and the needs of industrial and postindustrial societies and the emphasis on obtaining diplomas and degrees have all contributed to the demand for higher education, as in many countries a university degree was a requirement for a middle-class occupation, (Altbach, 2016:43). From the analysis that has been done right through, it is quite clear that credentialing had become too important and had become a passport to better professional jobs, prosperity, recognition, respect, job security and better jobs. It was the make and break in modern society. In 1994 the USA Congress prohibited mandatory retirement for tenured faculty as part of legislation against age discrimination, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:6). There is a critical shortage of top grade tenured faculty globally and the USA was acting to extend access and use of that critical expertise for national economic gain, which is very correct and strategic. The UK and the rest of Europe mostly do that. Why do some GCC and other 3rd world countries insist on retirement age of 60 years when globally it is not economically good to do that, and ruinous for countries that are robbed of critically important strategic skills and expertise that take decades to create and produce? Oman abolished the retirement age for academics a few years back, a smart futuristic move. It is high



time such national policies are done away with. Instructors were responsible for dual competencies which were mastery of both the subject matter and the art of conveying it for maximum student learning, (Christensen & Eyring, 2011:259). But learning took two to tango. Students must have the motivation and commitment to learn too.

The urgent questions of the contemporary world – on the environment, economic development, health care, international relations, to name a few – increasingly demanded intellectual synthesis, skills and capacities that span different fields and the essential work of research universities must address those questions, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:11). Unlike a car, college requires the buyer to do most of the work to obtain its value and the value of a degree depends more on the student's output than the college's curriculum: the courses a student takes, his/her intellectual curiosity, participation in class, his/her focus and determination – all contribute far more to his/her educational outcome than the college's overall curriculum, much less its amenities and social life, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:13), quoting Hunter Rawlings. It is not a secret that a few students did not want to attend college but are forced by parents and peer pressure to do so, is reality the world over.

It said good teaching and appropriate assessment were found to have an unexpected effect. Specifically, good teaching was found to only have a positive impact on surface motive, while appropriate assessment was found to negatively influence students' deep as well as surface approaches. These findings highlighted the need to re-examine the role of teacher-centered pedagogy and the nature of student assessment in university teaching, (Yin, Wang & Han, 2016:39-57). But many authors say they opposite on this. As GCC HEIs grapple with their myriad of challenges they

need to take these researches into account.

Social diversity would increasingly characterize university life in decades to come; diversity in terms of race, class and gender among others, should inform universities shaping of their student and faculty populations, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:14). Higher education was every country's most powerful path to change and thus to social and economic growth and every national's future depended on higher education as it does on nothing else, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:15).

### **THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND OTHER ISSUES**

A study of Chinese students revealed that the quality of undergraduate teaching was an issue under heated dispute in China. The study also revealed the desirable effects of clear goals and standards, an emphasis on independence, generic skills, and an appropriate workload on students' approaches to studying (measured by the Study Process Questionnaire) and course satisfaction (measured by the Overall Satisfaction Scale).

In their study of 148 students selected from 11 degrees from nine centers of the Polytechnic University of Valencia (Spain) researchers found that university professors could reinforce the deep approach by placing high aims for students which went well beyond reproducing knowledge but using other complementary methods other than expository teaching: problem solving, case studies, designing projects, raising questions, discussion and negotiation in the classroom, etc. They argued that to accomplish that, teachers had to encourage students to be committed, and those methods helped do that. It also helped to introduce more demanding evaluation procedures which did not merely involve repeating what had been learnt, but included training guidance that offered students feedback, (López, Cerveró, Rodríguez, Félix & Esteban, 2013:50-60).

Researchers had tried to induce a deeper approach to learning by means of student-centred learning environments and research to determine whether perceived workload and task complexity were discouraging or encouraging factors for university students was carried out. In general, results showed no significant relationship between perceived workload and students' approaches to learning. For perceived task complexity, it was found that a perceived lack of information was a discouraging factor for inducing a deep learning approach. A lack of information consistently increased students' surface approaches to learning regardless of the induced workload and task complexity, (Kyndt, Dochy, Struyven & Cascallar, 2011:393-415: Online). What could be the realities in GCC higher education where graduate fitness for the job market has been a point of discussions for a long time.

Results from recent research showed that use of student-centred learning environments in education had increased and that most students preferred teacher direction, cooperative learning and knowledge construction, and adopted a deep approach. Moreover, significant correlations were found between approaches to learning and instructional preferences. It said students adopting a deep approach preferred knowledge construction and cooperative learning, while students adopting a surface approach had a preference for teacher direction and passive learning, (Baeten, Dochy, Struyven, Parmentier & Vanderbruggen, 2016:43-62).

A study investigated the effects of two contrasting learning environments on students' course experiences: a lecture-based setting to a student-activating teaching environment was carried out and involved five research conditions that went together with one of four assessment modes, namely, portfolio, case-based, peer assessment, and multiple-choice testing. The results showed

that while the perceptions of lecture-taught students were focused and concordantly positive, students' course experiences with student-activating methods were widely varied and both extremely positive and negative opinions were present. It concluded that students' arguments in favour of the activating setting were the variety of teaching methods, the challenging and active nature of the assignments and the joys of collaborative work in teams, whereas students expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of learning gains, the associated time pressure and workloads, and the (exclusive) use of collaborative assignments and related group difficulties. This could be extremely useful for improvement of teaching methods in Oman where flipped teaching was introduced a few years back but was still in its infancy. There is still widespread use of lecturing and teacher-centred approaches, (Struyven, Dochy, Janssens & Gielen, 2008:11-83).

Researchers in Pakistan concluded that the quality of higher education was increasingly becoming an important issue as the socio-economic development of a country owed much to it. In their study on students' satisfaction and entrepreneurial efficacy done in Pakistan it was revealed that private sector university students are quite satisfied from the services of their universities and their perceived entrepreneurial self-efficacy level was also higher. The students of public sector universities were dissatisfied and their perceived entrepreneurial self-efficacy level was lower. Furthermore, it was discovered that quality of services of universities had a positive impact on students' satisfaction and perceived entrepreneurial self-efficacy level, (Ahmed, Lulin & Bajwa, 2016:66-78).

Researchers in Finland researching on winners of national teaching excellence awards from 2010-2012 discovered that common practices included quality assurance-related activities, researcher

training, core analysis of content and active participation of stakeholders. Comparisons with earlier research showed similarities in practices with the Norwegian Centres of Excellence. They concluded that the research results could be utilized as a benchmark to support development work in higher education and researcher believes Oman could take a leaf from this research to improve teaching standards in universities, (Kauppila, 2016:14-33).

A research paper in Portugal to establish if there was a direct link between student life satisfaction and life in general and the link between student life satisfaction and students' performance was confirmed by research results. Researchers believed that research results could assist managers of educational institutions in creating a strategy, leading to better students' satisfaction with student life quality and their performance, (Mihanović & Zekić, 2016:34-45). Researchers confirmed that excellence in institutional, management, instructional, pedagogical, resource support, ethical considerations and evaluation factor and 35 sub-components created satisfaction in virtual universities, (Dastjerdi, 2016:46-55).

International Business Publications (2005:308) argued that resources needed to be diverted from other activities to educational expansion and to the enhancement of quality, which they said remained a problem throughout the Arab world. In the quest to revive the social compact in higher education Arizona State University resolved to expand enrollment capacity, promote diversity and provide accessibility to world-class research and scholarship a diverse and heterogeneous student body that includes students from socioeconomically differentiated and underrepresented backgrounds, including first-generation applicants, (Crow & Dabars, 2015:250). Most 3rd world countries, suffer from a certain percentage of exclusion as governments cut down

higher education funding through austerity. Children from poor families were finding it increasingly difficult to finance education and some opted out and gave up university education altogether.

During the 20th century, American universities and colleges were faced with many challenges—a multi-fold increase in students; non-stop increases in research output; and a barrage of critiques from all sides about diversity, access, purpose, pedagogy, and accountability, (Mandell, 2016:301-305). This was a hot topic globally at the moment. Mitchell (2016: 315-317) contented that higher education had long been considered a public good, with the definition of public good being defined – or presumed – variously by individual colleges and universities. He said yet, definitions and discussions of what it meant to serve the public good remained tacit and in the book *In Longing for Justice*, Jennifer Simpson shined a light on issues of social justice, power, and the public good in relation to undergraduate education in North America, because “in North America, we never live outside of democratic contradictions and aspirations” (p. 214). There are many powerful interest groups and group dynamics involved in higher education and consensus decisions normally prevail over singular decisions.

Clawson & Page (2011:13; 31-36) argued that students joined colleges for good and weird reasons some of which were:- a good life and good job/job security, a time of freedom, an opportunity to make friends for a life time, a chance to explore ideas, meet different kinds of people, see the world in new ways, a chance for party and drink. They said that kids from poor backgrounds found it very difficult to get places at colleges because of lack of required fees and subsistence money, poor SAT scores caused by unsupportive parents, divorces and broken families, brawling families, poverty, poor accommodation/facilities, deprivation, lack

of access to computers/internet and lack of books at home, attending poor rated schools, a poor achievement and education culture at home and social upheaval, drug peddling, getting too involved with girls and boys, among many evils. They said even if they got places their chances of completing degrees were less than half those of kids from rich well-to-do families for the same reasons. This was corroborated in many other studies referred to earlier on.

So why were faculty and colleges always held responsible for students' failure and failure to complete degrees when most causal factors were outside the colleges, and resided in government education policy, families and communities? To extend the debate on these issues Lombardi (2013:123) argued that teaching was a collaborative enterprise that required the active and engaged participation of teachers and students. He said students who did not want to learn or who arrived without adequate preparation from schools and parents were difficult to teach while teachers who are indifferent and uninspiring made it difficult for willing students to learn. He argued that evaluating effectiveness of teaching and learning was no easy task. Here was an accident in waiting and fault lines.

Clawson & Page (2011:50-51) quoting the first Marquess of Halifax said, "The right name for our society's current policy of charging thousands of dollars for public higher education is 'outrageous' and perhaps 'irrational'. And yet we live in a world where to suggest that public higher education should be free is regarded as lunacy." He went further to say if public colleges and universities were free many more people would go to school and benefit society. This was the American higher education system and beyond.

### **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 actually 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 had speed and overload in academics negatively compromised research output and with what consequences for quality higher education systems? 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 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 leading economies as well as in the GCC compared to other countries?

### **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.

#### **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 goals. 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 barriers facing Oman colleges and universities and possible solutions. The focus of this research was mainly to look at the global HEIs in USA, Europe and Asia and take stock of their history and operations. It was part of this research to investigate and see how global HEI were affected by the Theory of Higher Education Management with focus on key issues about students, academic work and competition and to test the relevance and shortcomings of this theory, if any, and contribute to theory building. This theory had generally been tested many times in developed countries but the industry was too dynamic and fast-changing and new realities were needed to keep pace with this multi-interest group industry. The findings from this research would be quite a breakthrough and would make an important contribution to the management of colleges and higher education institutions in Oman, the GCC learning from the giants of HEI in those three leading continents, Americas, Asia and Europe.

#### **Conceptual framework**

The Theory of Higher Education Management (THEM) is an overall management philosophy that is geared to help organizations continually achieve their goals. Its measurements are given by throughput (rate of production), inventory flow, and operating expenses (effect on sales and competitiveness of education services) in higher education. 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 the 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 key issues about students, academics, faculty and resourcing issues. This research must identify all barriers facing HEI in the three continents and possible solutions.

The underlying theory in this research was the Theory of Higher Education Management 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 success and service excellence in global 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 global higher education institutions were achieving customer satisfaction all the time, creating knowledge and having good teaching, assessment and employability of graduates and the barriers that they faced in achieving that, if any.

### **STRESS, FRUSTRATION AND ILLNESSES AMONG ACADEMICS IN USA**

Berg and Seeber, (2016:6-7), quoting a 2014 article in the Guardian Higher Education Network, "Dark Thoughts: Why Mental Illness Is on The Rise in Academia," said workloads – particularly

demands for increased product and productivity, have ballooned amidst an uncaring academic environment for faculty and graduate students and the notion of students as customers combined with greater reliance on technology had led to the increased blurring of work and life, with for example demands such as 24 hour limit for responses to student queries. The pressure was unrelenting in Europe, USA, China and the rest of Asia, and colleges were fighting for students just like Chinese competition on global markets. The way Chinese textiles and toys had decimated world markets for competitors was the way colleges were competing for students in leading world economies. The competition was cut-throat and survival of the fittest. Student numbers were declining as more HEIs were opened in the leading world economies. We are all aware of declining birth rates in Europe, Japan and some major economies and the capping or reduction of international students through harsh anti-immigration laws there, and their negative effects of student numbers. UK universities were retrenching large numbers of academics as there was a critical shortage of students because of this. It has become a hot election issue this year between the major political parties in the UK and will partly decide the outcome and voting pattern. Student recruitment is now a battleground for UK universities.

### **ANALYSIS OF ISSUES**

Davidson (2017:248) was blunt and to the point when she said that society faced two dangers which were the creeping obsolescence of HEIs and the changing job market and economy, and both needed to be managed carefully for success and relevance. Turner and Solis (2017:64-76) strongly felt that there was a need for adequate training and professional development on differentiation of teaching methods for better teaching and learning. They were admonishing faculty to have a variety of

teaching methods, an issue that was raised as a major concern by many students and HEI players in this literature review.

Many millions of students were coming to HEI ill prepared for college work thus creating a danger that they could only be graduated by lowering academic standards, (Bok, 2017:170). The learning college would reflect that student learning and the assessment of that learning was central to the mission of the college, its philosophy, its values, and the identity of the institution, (Antony, Cauce & Shalala, 2017:20), quoting Blaich and Wise, 2010:10-20; Cistone and Bashford, 2002:40-60; Dwyer, Millet and Payne, 2006:60-80. A study by the United Nations University under the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) in 2008 involving 48 universities (2008:315-318) across the world said of the Arabic Middle East region, that a survey on leading academics revealed that the region should prioritise the training of teaching staff (78%) as priority number one. Some academics were experts in their skills areas but poor teachers. Training in pedagogics and assessment was critical for success.

Universities could not flourish without improving access and quality of education and the quality of teachers there, as well as increased funding for elementary and intermediate education, (Cole, 2009:507). From the foregoing it was quite clear there was a convergence of theory and findings on the grounds on issues like compulsory internship, diversity in terms of faculty employed, customization of teaching materials, research/teaching nexus, benchmarking standards, learning/private life balance for students, value of canteens serving good food, objectivity in assessment, value of comprehensive feedback to students and the value of resourcing HEI. Alon and McIntyre (2013: 5-27) argued that higher education had become the basic education of the knowledge economy and yet in transitioning,

emerging and developing countries, resources for higher education, and indeed higher educational systems themselves, remained inadequate. Harvard Business Review (2013:121) made the case for strategic product fit with the market, when they warned that suppliers needed to provide customer value proposition by making their offerings superior on the few elements that mattered most to target customers, demonstrating and documenting the value of this superior performance, communicating it correctly and finally that value in performance had to be proved in practice as a customer benefit. This was graduate fitness for the labour market or industry. Surely what mattered most for employers was competence, performance and strategic fit in teams. Grade inflation had eroded the value of degrees in the USA and was a great cause for concern for employers and industry, and degree grades meant almost nothing and employers had lost faith and did not use grades as indicators of success any more, but relied on other tests of competence in interviews, (Selingo, 2013:24). Oman was not that bad but had its own few issues exposed in this research. Tough accreditation regulations and oversight by Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MOHERI) had improved standards in Oman.

Diversity of life experiences and opinions enriched the educational experience (Antony, Cauce and Shalala (2017:77), while confronting differences can be uncomfortable, but can contribute significantly to learning and a future working life. College served as a turning point in the lives of almost everyone and was a time and place where people learnt how to better fit into the world and create a meaning for their lives, (Selingo, 2013:168). The feedback provided by students showed that the intervention fostered student learning (Wilmot & Merino, 2015:n.p), and the faculty's own teaching practice improved through reflecting on and making changes to his teaching

approach. It was contented by Best (2011:42-43), that education could only be improved through smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, more computers in classrooms and better facilities. Students faced many challenges nowadays like weak employment prospects for graduates and class sizes had swelled (Mettler, S., 2014:189), and classes were being taught by adjunct or temporary faculty, and there was less support for students which was now affecting graduation rates downwards. Labaree (2017:92) reflected saying America had been shifting to vocationalism, practical education and the professions for the past 150 years and away from theoretical dispositions. This raised the obvious value of vocational education and technical universities.

The issues dominating these findings were:- the demand for more practicals and new teaching methods, the call for fair assessment, balancing classes with free time, the need for diversity in terms of faculty which should be recruited from the whole world rather than having most faculty from one country only, the lack of compulsory internship which is compromising experience in industry for students and is one of the known causes of graduate unemployment where it is not done, some faculty were too shallow in their majors and had no experience, lack of care for students, courses needed to be updated regularly too out of date, lack of use of simple language understood by students, valueless courses in degree plan, lack of customization of courses to include local issues, lack of internship in degrees, some academic advisers were not helpful, lack of balance between theory and practicals, learning was very stressful for some students because of pressure, concern about unfair grading, some questions being beyond the level of the students, poor syllabi coverage, too many questions in examinations which could not be completed within given time, questions being too long and not clear, lack of proper moderation of examination papers,

inadequate feedback on assessments, industrial visits were of great value to students, and finally some teachers did not take students for industrial visits.

A study by the United Nations University under the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) in 2008 involving 48 universities (2008:315-318) across the world said of the Arabic Middle East region, that a survey on leading academics revealed that the region had poor training of teaching staff (50%) and that the training of teaching staff was rated at 78% as priority number one for that region if excellence was to be achieved in teaching and learning. Training pedagogics to teachers in HEI remained a challenge which had to be addressed. But others would argue that teachers sometimes were good but there were partly no takers, if one considers the quality of some of the students coming from high schools to HEI. Christensen & Eyring (2011:125) quoted former Harvard University President, Conant, who said that it was important to ensure a steady supply of well-prepared students for Harvard and other universities. James Bray, a director of technical Education in USA (Selingo, 2013:162) said an education after high school should include on-the-job training and apprenticeship as well as experiences before college that improve the difficult transition to college.

The work is cut out for Oman and other GCC countries and the world at large. Higher education is learning forever never stops.

### **LIMITATIONS IN THIS RESEARCH**

This research faced a number of limitations. One of those limitations was access to some documents considered sensitive which would be out of reach. However, researcher compensated 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 comprehensive diverse sources covering all issues that normally affected 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.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The debates reflected here point to the following recommendations across Oman HEI and globally for better HEIs:

- HEIs needed to understand the reasons for high labour turnover by academics for stability, institutional memory, branding and quality.
- Curricular must be revised regularly to keep up with global trends and labour market realities and to improve graduate employability and suitability for labour market.
- Overworking by academics in advanced economies must be reduced to protect the health of academics and their functionality as well as time to do research. This may be the same situation in other countries too.
- Since a lot of student-related issues were mostly outside colleges but in families out there, there was a need to involve parents and guardian much more.
- Governments must take tough measures to dismantle irresponsible capitalism and wealth accumulation and do more wealth redistribution to drastically reduce poverty and make resources available to ordinary citizens. That way more students would be supported by their families and reduce poverty-related student drop-outs,

frustrations and poor performers linked to poverty. Students' dignity needed to be restored and not possible with high levels of poverty.

- Regular compulsory structured training in HEI 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, research).
- 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.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

America, Europe and Asia HEIs had a done a lot in higher education which was acknowledged and respected by the whole world, but more still needed to be done for excellence. Issues differed across the world 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? 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. The Theory of Higher Education Management was an ongoing debate in Oman HEI and globally and constraints did affect HEIs in terms of student issues, academic issues, trust issues and marketing/branding.

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