



**THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY PARTNERS
IN ASSURING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING IN OFFSHORE PROGRAMMES**

A STUDY OF OMANI PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the
degree of Doctor of Education by Jokha Al Shikaili

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my beloved family, who have been my source of inspiration and encouragement to reach the end of my doctoral journey. A special dedication goes to my beloved husband who stood by me with his spiritual and emotional support that energised me with the needed strength when I thought of giving up. To my lovely kids: Sara, Ammar, Maria and Zeyad, whom I cannot thank them enough for their encouragement, understanding and sacrifices. To my parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, mentors, supervisors, friends, and classmates who nourished me with their wisdom that boosted my spirits in the difficult and confusing times of this research journey. This endeavour was impossible without their confidence and inspiration. Lastly and most importantly I dedicate this study to the Almighty God, for giving me a healthy life and the power of the mind to complete this journey.

“Thank you all”



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Abstract

Thesis title : The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes – A study of Omani Private Higher Education institutions.

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Provision of offshore programmes in the private higher education institutions (PHEIs) through affiliation agreements with international university partners (IUPs) is an important strategy deployed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Sultanate of Oman. The main motive for deploying this strategy is to improve higher education standards in the country and to foster institutional maturity in different quality aspects.

This study aimed to explore the role of (IUPs) in assuring the quality of offshore programmes offered by the PHEIs in the Omani context. The study focused on exploring this role and its effectiveness from the perspective of four local stakeholders' groups: MoHE officials, PHEI faculty members, postgraduate students enrolled in PHEIs and senior management of PHEIs. Data was collected from the concerned stakeholders using different methods such as interviews, focus group discussions; and a questionnaire.

Findings were analysed using thematic analysis approach to explore the main patterns extracted from data. Gap Analysis method was used to enable the identification of variations between expectations and perceptions of different stakeholders. The identified gaps, along with Social Inclusion theory enabled the study to identify potential options to improve the quality of offshore programmes to meet the broader needs of the society. The interpretivism approach



was adopted, as variables influencing the provision of offshore programmes are socially constructed and subject to the influence of the stakeholders' personal views. The findings of the study indicated that offshore programmes are effective in improving the quality of higher education in Oman. Overall, the stakeholders are satisfied with the current role played by IUPs in assuring the quality of these programmes. However, the study also indicated potentials for improvement in localising offshore programmes and improving local students and faculty engagement in different quality aspects pertaining to offshore programmes.

Moreover, the study brought out the need for refining the current policy framework pertaining to the delivery of offshore programmes and suggestions to improve the monitoring scheme conducted by MoHE. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute towards a better understanding of offshore programmes role in the region and the challenges faced to ensure better implementation of these programmes. The study proposes a framework for evaluating whether the quality of offshore programmes is meeting the needs of all stakeholders. The study concludes by addressing the limitations, scope for further research, and implications for professional practice.

Keywords: *Offshore programmes, Transnational education, Academic Affiliation, Quality Assurance, International University Partner (IUP), Internationalisation, Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI), Social Inclusion.*



Abbreviations List

DGPUC	:	Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges
EQA	:	External Quality Assurance
EQM	:	External Quality Monitoring
EQR	:	External Quality Review
GATS	:	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GCC	:	Gulf Cooperation Countries
GDP	:	Gross Domestic Product
HEI	:	Higher Education Institution
IQA	:	Internal Quality Assurance
IUP	:	International University Partner
MoHE	:	Ministry of Higher Education
NCSI	:	National Centre for Statistical Information
OAAA	:	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
PHEI	:	Private Higher Education Institution
TQM	:	Total Quality Management
UN	:	United Nations
UNESCO	:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WTO	:	World Trade Organisation



List of Key Terminologies

Accreditation : A formal periodic quality review conducted by an external national or international body to ensure that a set of defined standards has been met by a higher education institution. The review process undertaken should be independent and external to the institutions and leads to certain accreditation status that conferred by the accreditation body and made available for the public (OAAA, 2016).

Affiliation : A formal academic collaboration agreement signed between a local higher education institution and a foreign institution aiming to assess and support the local institution in different academic aspects including programme delivery, quality follow-up, and provision of qualification. This agreement normally includes a set of items and clauses that identify the scope of responsibilities and obligations of each party in the agreed set of services.

HEI : A higher education institution where tertiary education is provided.

Host Country : The country where offshore programmes are hosted and delivered via a higher education institution.

IUP : An International University Partner. It is an international or foreign university that signs an affiliation agreement with a local HEI to



offer its programmes and award its degrees for the local students. Usually, this Affiliation Agreement defines clearly the role of the international university (External provider) and the local university/college (hosted institution) in different quality aspects for the sake of successful delivery of the programme to local entrants.

MoHE : Ministry of Higher Education. It is the regulatory body of the Oman government for higher education institutions in Oman. It is responsible for promoting a higher education system that *a) keeps pace with developments and changes in today's world; b) meets the requirements of sustainable development in the Knowledge era, while preserving the cultural identity of Omani society; and, c) contributes to the progress and development of humankind* (www.mohe.gov.om)

Offshore Programme : A higher education programme that crosses national jurisdictional borders and takes place in a different country through a formal affiliation agreement between a higher education institution in the source country and a local higher education institution in the hosting country.

OAAA : Oman Academic Accreditation Authority. The national accreditation authority is entrusted with ensuring that the quality of higher education in Oman is in line with international standards and encourage higher education institutions to improve their internal



quality (www.oaaa.gov.om).

PHEI : Private Higher Education Institution. A higher education institution that is established by a sole or group of investors with the aim of profit-making by offering different educational programmes leading to specific academic qualifications such as graduate and postgraduate degrees. This type of higher education depends typically on generating cash through students' tuition fees and other related sources of income.



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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In the present era of rapid internationalisation, education has become one of the essential requirements for human resources development and social transformation. The government of Oman has adopted the strategy of offering offshore programmes by local Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in affiliation with international university partners (IUPs) to improve the higher education quality in Oman. Despite its importance, there is little evidence of efforts to understand the effectiveness of affiliated programmes and how they meet the expectations of national stakeholders. This study focused on assessing the effectiveness of offshore programmes provided by Omani PHEIs in affiliation with IUPs from different stakeholders' perspectives and to assess IUPs commitment towards improving the quality of higher education in Oman. For the purpose of this study, an offshore programme is defined as a higher education programme that crosses national borders and takes place in a host country through a formal affiliation agreement between an IUP in the source country and a higher education institution in the host country (Stella and Bhushan, 2011).

Higher Education in Oman has witnessed a great improvement in the last ten years in term of increasing students' access to higher education and in enabling students to become interactive learners. With the development of the education Strategy 2040 in the country, the government gives more attention on building higher education that enables students to engage and interact with the international changing demands in the workforce without undermining their cultural and social values (The Education Council, 2014). The pathways to achieve this is by inculcating values and attitudes which enable students to appreciate common human



values and develop positive attitudes towards themselves and others. These values are expected to equip students to participate in their communities positively and to develop their entrepreneurship skills required for sustainable development and economic growth.

The current higher education institutions (HEIs) needs to be more innovative in designing programmes that are balanced in equipping students with work and life skills. Therefore, the quality of programmes needs to be assessed through a set of criteria that ensure programme localisation and relevancy to the Omani context without compromising the need for enhancing students with an international outlook. The Philosophy of Education (MoHE, 2017), stated that the Oman government aspires to develop students with a lifelong learning attitude. This achievement requires the development of academic programmes that enhance positive life-skills, independent learning, long-term planning, and problem-solving skills. The extent to which the current offshore programmes help students to acquire these skills has to be assessed using a more inclusive quality framework that measures the degree of students' social empowerment and engagement. The current quality system in Oman is structured to view quality from "fitness for purpose" angle with little focus on the ability of higher education to transfer students to be become socially and culturally empowered to better serve their community. The existing literature suggests that offshore programmes encounter many challenges pertaining to their relevance to the local context and social values. This study addresses the localisation gap by exploring a new quality framework that helps in assessing the quality of offshore programmes from a social perspective.

Research Aims

This topic was chosen due to the high importance placed by the government of Oman on offshore programmes as a means for improving the quality of higher education in the country. The first aim of this study is to explore the impact of higher education quality



assurance system in Oman in improving human potential skills and capabilities of the youngsters. Building up human potential is an effective means that inspires students to be good citizens and good learners. This approach also helps in developing and motivating lifelong learning of students through a comprehensive development of students' intellectual, social and physical dimensions (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). This enhancement facilitates faster achievement of the goals envisaged by the Philosophy of Education set by the government of Oman to raise social awareness and reinforce values of citizenship and Omani identity (The Education Council, 2017). Secondly, this study aims to identify the concerns of relevant stakeholders on the quality issues of offshore programmes leading to proposing improvements to the present quality efforts in higher education. The third aim is to find out how PHEIs are fulfilling the quality requirements set by IUPs to improve the quality of offshore programmes and to explore the extent to which these requirements ensure proper implementation of offshore programmes. Finally, this study aims to find out the contribution of IUPs with different affiliation models make to improving the quality of higher education provided by the local PHEIs.

The expansion of PHEIs has brought out different affiliation models in Oman that have different quality assurance arrangements and different commitment levels toward monitoring the implementation of offshore programmes. These aims are included in the study objectives as I observed in my role as a government official that there is a lack of such analysis in the present quality assessment approach.

Research Objectives

Based on the above research aims, the objectives of this study are stated as follows:

1. To obtain the insights of relevant national stakeholders on the needs and expectations of quality from offshore programmes through PHEI in the Omani



higher education sector.

2. To explore the stakeholders' perceptions on the effectiveness of Oman PHEI offshore programmes in fulfilling the quality objectives and students' social and intellectual transformation.
3. To evaluate the regulatory changes required by PHEIs and MoHE for enhancing the quality of offshore programmes.
4. To develop a holistic framework to assure the quality of offshore programmes in PHEIs in Oman by incorporating the higher-level national objectives based on social goals and concerns of all national stakeholders.

These objectives were achieved by exploring the perceptions and expectations of relevant stakeholders of PHEIs offering offshore programmes in Oman. Four different categories of stakeholders were considered for this study. These are: the senior officials from MoHE, the academic staff in PHEIs, students in PHEIs, and senior management of PHEIs. In accordance with the objectives of this study, the research aims to answer the following four research questions: -

1. What are the key factors perceived by Omani stakeholders as vital to assure the quality of teaching in offshore programmes?
2. What are the roles and responsibilities of the IUPs in assuring the quality of teaching at the Omani PHEIs from the key stakeholders' viewpoint?
3. To what extent have the IUPs fulfilled their responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programmes at the local PHEIs as perceived by the stakeholders?
4. How might key policies be improved to ensure better implementation of offshore programmes in Oman from the key stakeholders' perspectives?

The above questions guided data collection from the selected stakeholders. Face to



face interviews were conducted with MoHE officials and management of PHEIs. Focus group discussions were conducted to collect data from students, and a semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the faculty of these institutions. The study findings were analysed using thematic analysis. Stakeholders' perceptions and expectations were then identified and assessed using Gap Analysis method and Social Inclusion theoretical framework. Gap Analysis enabled me to understand the difference between the perceptions and expectations of various stakeholder groups about the role of IUPs in assuring the quality of offshore programmes. To identify the potential improvements in the current quality assurance approaches, Social Inclusion theory was used to further explore the needed improvements. Social Inclusion theory and its rationale are detailed under the theoretical framework section in Chapter 2.

Rationale of the study

There is very little understanding of the dynamics of different offshore models of higher education in the Middle East and its popularity (Willoughby, 2008), although the Middle East accounts for 30% of the institutions offering these models (Miller-Idriss and Hanauer, 2011). This is due to the lack of studies on this phenomenon and the absence of reliable statistics in this matter. Also, the number of studies examining challenges on maintaining the quality of offshore programmes in Oman and the Middle East was found to be quite limited. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by providing insight into the underlying factors and challenges to quality assurance in higher education through offshore programmes provision in Oman. A recent study conducted by Shanfari and Awadh (2017) on teaching quality in Omani PHEIs revealed inconsistencies between planned and actual outcomes of education goals. The quality of higher education may not remain a priority for some PHEIs due to pressures of being profitable (Wilkins, 2010). Therefore, this study



acquires significance in this context by exploring different stakeholders' views, interests; and their expectations on the quality of offshore programmes.

The government of Oman envisions an integrated development of students' maximum potential that is aligned to the aspirations and identity of the Omani society (MoHE, 2014). This vision requires the development of positive learning attitudes, social life-skills, independent learning, long-term planning, and lifelong learning skills. Therefore, this study has enabled the development of a new quality framework that incorporates social justice with human potential dimensions in the current quality system. The current system relies on the traditional quality assessment that views quality from 'fitness for purpose' perspective; however, this study has proposed a more inclusive framework that focuses on students' transformation from a social perspective. For this reason, Social Inclusion theory is proposed as an additional dimension to the current quality system. Although existing literature has highlighted the quality concerns of offshore programmes, studies evaluating the implementation of offshore programmes are rare (Baporikar & Shah, 2012). This study addresses the deficiency of knowledge in this area by providing insight into the extent to which PHEIs partners are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as per the affiliation agreements.

From a personal perspective, this study is important as my professional practice in the MoHE is closely aligned with this topic. My role is to ensure the PHEIs compliance and commitments in offering quality programmes to Omani students through effective implementation of the different rules and regulation set by the government. In addition, I am responsible for reviewing and overseeing the academic affiliation agreements between local PHEIs and IUPs to ensure that each party fulfils their role adequately and effectively. My role in MoHE brought me face-to-face with different issues about the contribution of PHEIs and IUP in providing quality offshore programmes. The outcomes of this study will help me in



pointing out the areas for improvements in the current policy system and suggesting changes that allow better implementation of offshore programmes in Oman.

Context Background

Oman, officially known as the Sultanate of Oman, is a country situated in the Middle East and is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Oman's current population is approximately 4.7 million where children under age 15 years represent 30%, adults aged 15-64 years represent 66% and only 3% are aged 65 years and above (NCSI, 2017).

Omani culture is influenced by the sociological and historical background of the people and the nation. Oman has a civilisation which dated back to 5000 years, with a history of maritime power that extended to the Persian Gulf, parts of Asia, and East Africa (Taei, 2008). Omani culture was influenced by the attacking and partly occupying forces of western powers of Portugal back in the Sixteenth century and Britain in the Nineteenth century (Bhacker, 2002). These influences mostly affected the coastal regions of Oman with interior remaining unaffected and having full autonomy.

Oman being in the Arab region shares common features such as religion, language and tribalistic social system of Arab culture. Omani society is group-based on their tribe, ethnicity, language (local dialects), and geography (Peterson, 2007). Oman is a Muslim country and the society extracts their values and beliefs from the Islamic school of thought. Islam has a powerful influence on the social and political systems of governance (Tayeb, 1997). It also has a significant impact on the behaviour and affiliation of the individuals in society (Ali, 1996). Tribalism plays an essential part in social cohesion and serves as a reference point for the status of individuals (Althakhri and Rees, 2008). Social class, lineage, privileges, and roles are significantly influenced by the tribe (Mohamed, O'Sullivan and Ribiere, 2008). The social



norms and social relationships are highly influenced by the tribal and patriarchal power, as elders are respected and tribal relations strongly influence interpersonal relations (Robertson, Al-Khatib, Al-Habib & Lanoue, 2001). There is no caste system in Oman; however; there is a social hierarchy system which connects different family members with the eldest members of the tribe. Omanis are family-oriented and place great importance and loyalty towards family and relatives in social transactions (Kabasakal, Dastmalchian, Karacay & Bayraktar, 2012).

Omanis value experience, customs, seniority and collective achievement more than asserting individual qualities and taking initiatives (Javidan, 2004). According to Al-Twaijri and Al-Muhaiza (1996), Oman scores high on power distance and greater uncertainty avoidance, but lower on masculinity than other Arab countries (Al-Twaijri & Al-Muhaiza, 1996). Such variations may be attributed to contemporary changes in the culture and increased participation of females in the workplace (Mujtaba, Khanfar & Khanfar, 2009). Omani women are advancing their roles and rights in the political and social areas (Keddie, 2007). In 2017, women have occupied around 47% of the workforce in the public sector and 24 % in the private sector and mostly employed in the health and education sector (www.ncsi.gov.om). According to the National Center of Statistics and Information (NCSI), females represented 59% of overall students in higher education in 2016. Women expansion in HE came as a result of the transparent national admission policy that gives equal opportunities for boys and girls based on their performance, not their gender.

Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) scores higher on group collectivism dimension of culture than other Arab states (Gupta & Hanges, 2004). This has led to a workplace that respects friendly relations, group harmony and gives importance to loyalty and obedience of seniority (Dedoussis, 2004). Cultural factors tend to make business management in Oman conservative in risk-taking and encourage consultative decision making (Bakhtari, 1995).

The technological and economic transformations in society affect cultural values



(Fertig, 1996), and Oman is no exception. The Omani renaissance promoted by the Government has not only created wealth but also exposed Oman people to information, technologies, and modern lifestyle. Globalization has resulted in efforts to reduce illiteracy, improve skills and changes to regulations that WTO rules for encouraging investment and aligning with the global marketplace (Al-Hamadi, Budhwar & Shipton, 2007). Government has also supported the development of new social groups that are empowered to foster economic growth while maintaining social harmony (Peterson, 2004).

The gross enrollment in the tertiary education institutions in the country was 44.6% in 2016. Education in public higher education institutions (HEIs) is free, and admission is very competitive. Due to the high demand for HE opportunities, the government invited the private sector to invest in HE since 1994. The MoHE was also established in the same year to develop and monitor higher education activities. For students and their parents to gain confidence in the education quality of PHEIs, the MoHE initiated various systems, regulations, bylaws, and legislation. These included mandatory academic collaboration between PHEIs and IUPs, making these IUPs responsible for the quality of offshore programmes and directly awarding their degrees. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) was also established by a royal decree in 2010 to be in charge of conducting institutional quality audits and accreditation and programme accreditation of all HEIs. OAAA accreditation activities are now helping in building national trust in both private and public HEIs and in enhancing the national quality system. These government efforts have led to the establishment of 28 PHEIs as of 2018 resulting in greater diversity within the higher education system in Oman (Al Najar, 2016). PHEIs through the imported curriculum, international faculty, and using English as the primary medium of instruction have brought international standards and practices into the country's education system (Baporikar & Shah, 2012).



Thesis Structure

This thesis follows a standard format, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review and a theoretical framework for the study design and research. The research methodology of the study is provided in Chapter 3 which details the methodology, steps taken to ensure quality, consideration in ethics, inquiry approach, researcher positionality, data collection, and analysis. The results obtained from the thematic analysis of the data collected in this study is provided in Chapter 4. The narrative of this section is structured to align with the research questions for easy correlation to study aims. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study by providing generalised postulations that enhance knowledge on the research aims. The Chapter also provides a framework for the holistic assessment of quality in higher education that is aligned to Oman context. The conclusions and recommendations of this study are provided in Chapter 6.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This Chapter explores the existing knowledge, practices, and challenges for assuring quality in higher education, especially in offshore programmes provided by Omani PHEIs. It begins with a background about the higher education system in Oman, followed by examining the nature, modalities, and the quality of offshore programmes. Literature about stakeholder expectations and perceptions about the quality and outcomes of higher education is reviewed next. The definitions of quality, especially that in offshore higher education, are also presented. The challenges associated with quality assurance and emerging trends are also examined. The Chapter concludes with a framework that guides the data analysis of this study.

Background

Higher Education System in Oman

Before the 1970s, the education system in Oman was rooted in a non-formal type of education where students were first educated in religious centres and then in state-owned schools that had a traditional mode of teaching. Significant changes to curriculum and education process were initiated in 1970 when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said (the ruler of the country) gained power. His Majesty led a campaign to evaluate and reconstruct the educational system to suit developmental needs and establish Oman as a developing country (Ministry of Education, n.d). The first decade of educational reforms in Oman began in the 1970s. During that period, there were no higher education institutions in Oman. The higher education opportunities were only available for outstanding students through external



scholarships scheme funded by the government to a few destinations abroad including UK, USA, India, Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait. As a result of expansion in basic education and female enrolment by the end of the 1970s, the government realised the need to expand higher education opportunities all over the country. This expansion was necessary to ensure that all pupils graduating from secondary schools have equal opportunity to pursue their higher education (Maskri, Mukhini & Amzat, 2012).

Expansion in general education became a national level priority from 1970 as part of the education renaissance. This has resulted in a major expansion in the schooling system with a total of 1068 schools offering education up to the secondary level for 545,068 students and employing 56,586 faculty in the year 2016. Currently, the general education system in Oman comprises of three levels: pre-school education, basic education (Grade 1-10) and post-basic education (Grade 11 and 12). The system addresses the issues of gender inequality, enhanced net enrolment rates and improved literacy in the country (Ministry of Education, n.d).

The local Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) started to surface in the early 1980s with the establishment of teacher community colleges that offered education diplomas, and the Institute of Bankers, that awarded diplomas in Accountancy and Finance. Sultan Qaboos University, the first public HE institution was inaugurated in the year 1986. These developments were followed by the establishment of other public HEIs such as the existing seven technical colleges, five colleges of education that were eventually transformed to colleges of applied sciences in 2005, 13 health science institutes, one college of education and one religious science institute (MoHE, n.d). These public HEIs are scattered in different governorates/regions of Oman enrolling around 48% of the total number of students admitted



in higher education. Education in public HEIs is free, and admission is very competitive as these degrees are considered by citizens to be of better quality than private HEIs.

Privatisation: Growth and Challenges

In 1994, due to the high demand for HE opportunities, the government invited the private sector to invest in HE. The government introduced attractive incentives to encourage more involvement from the private sector and to promote the establishment of PHEIs in Oman. These incentives included the provision of free land plots, five-year income tax exemption in addition to customs duty exemption for the imported educational equipment. The government contributed 50% of the capital (with a ceiling of Omani Rial (OMR) of three million-approx. US\$ 10 million) of private universities. Six private universities were provided with government financial grants of OMR 17 million (approx. US\$ 44 million) (Education in Sultanate of Oman, 2017). Starting from the year 2003, the government started providing full and partial scholarships for students of low income and social security strata studying in PHEIs 2003 (Al-Mukhaini, 2014). This scholarship scheme for PHEIs was expanded to include more student categories due to which scholarships increased from 2,600 in 2003 to 9,600 in 2011. Due to these government efforts, the number of private HEIs increased from six PHEIs in 2000 to 28 PHEIs in 2018. The first PHEI was established in 1994 with literally no clear ordinance or policies to control education and minimal supervision from the Ministry of Education. This situation changed in 1994 with the establishment of MoHE and promulgation of various Royal Decrees and regulations that oversee the HE private sector. The Royal Decree No.41/96 on the establishment of private colleges sets the main policies for regulating and supervising PHEIs (MoHE, n.d).

For students and their parents to gain confidence in the education quality of PHEIs, MoHE initiated various measures. For example, it set a compulsory licensing condition for all



PHEIs to have an academic collaboration with international partners to ensure the quality of all degrees awarded by these institutions. Besides awarding the foreign degrees, the foreign partner was made responsible for assuring the quality of programmes offered by the PHEIs. These conditions in the affiliation agreement ensured that PHEIs maintained international quality and standards and the programmes delivered were globally recognised. This achievement provided students with the option to continue their education abroad in the future. MoHE established an entire administrative function called the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges (DGPUC) which is responsible for overseeing and regulating all PHEIs. DGPUC is responsible for processing and executing all institutional and programme licensing programme requirements for PHEIs and to ensure that these institutions are following the rules and regulation that pertains to the private sector. MoHE's responsibilities include formulating higher education policies, establishing educational objectives and planning projects. MoHE has a leading role in monitoring the implementation of different higher education plans and projects.

Higher education in Oman witnessed a remarkable growth of many private and public institutions by the year 2000. This growth led the government to establish an independent body, namely the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) in 2001 to be responsible for assuring the quality of both public and private HE and setting accreditation criteria to ensure that Omani HEIs are of highest standards. In 2010, the OAC was renamed as Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) when a Royal Decree No. (54/2010) was issued to specify the mandates of this entity. OAAA aims to ensure building a robust quality assurance system in the country that meets international standards. OAAA runs different quality activities to meet its objectives. The major activities conducted by OAAA include institutional quality audits, programme accreditation, and institutional accreditation. OAAA accreditation activities help in building national trust in different private and public HEIs, in enhancing the



national quality system of PHEIs and will enable students to know that these private institutions are recognised and approved by the government.

The Education Council (previously called Higher Education Council) was reformed in 2012 to ensure compatibility of the different education policies and projects. The reformation of the council helped in expanding its role in monitoring the overall progress of education from kindergarten level to higher education level. The council took a leading role in building the national strategy of education 2040 and in ensuring that all education stakeholders are actively involved in this strategy. The Royal Decree (98/65) was formulated in the year 2012 for the establishment of the Education Council in Oman. The Council brought all different entities for educational management under a single umbrella (The Education Council, 2015).

With the opening of the educational sector to private institutions, females were allowed in the tertiary education field (Coffman, 2015). In Oman, cultural barriers limited the enrolment of females in schools before the 1970s. With the development of the education system post-1970, provision of separate schooling for both genders was made to ensure equal access to education for all. In higher education, the institutions have evolved to provide equal opportunities to both the genders. The selection criteria are based on the performance of the students. The percentage of female students registered in HEIs for the academic year 2015/2016 was about 57% of the total number of registered students. The ratio of female students registered in specialisations such as education, health, and natural science was even higher than males, who preferred the field of engineering and related technologies (Higher Education Admission Centre, 2017). PHEIs in Oman are privately funded institutions and hence have goals of imparting education and making profits to ensure its sustainability. The improvement and innovations in education have been impacted by the globalisation of economies that placed importance to the economic aspect, and Oman was not an exception.



The rapid increase in the number of PHEIs in Oman has brought constraints for monitoring their performance and assessing their alignment with policies formulated by the education bodies such as MoHE. The role of IUPs has been prominent in Omani higher education, but the extent of their role towards education quality has not been adequately examined (Ardakani, Yarmohammadian, Abari, & Fathi, 2011). The importance that some PHEIs place on economic performance by emphasising student enrolment over student learning (Al'Abri, 2016) is hampering the national objectives of capacity building and quality enhancement in higher education. McGowan and Potter (2008) point out that increasing the student population by PHEIs creates a considerable gap between practice and policy. Ferris (2005) contends that one fundamental principle behind internationalisation is that the offshore programmes should reflect the actual programmes offered in the parent campus. IUPs need to establish and maintain home campus quality system and standards to enable this. One of the biggest concerns in internationalising education lies in determining how this coherence can be sustained across national boundaries (Hudzik and Stohl, 2012). Although there are many studies highlighting the quality concerns of offshore programmes, studies evaluating the development of offshore programmes in Oman are rare (Baporikar and Shah, 2012).

Offshore Programmes: Rationale and Development

In the last four decades, education in Oman has achieved remarkable progress toward expanding student enrolment opportunities in education in both pre and post-education levels. Consequently, quality assurance, meeting labour market needs and international outreach are becoming the main challenges encountered by the education system in Oman (The Education Council 2014). According to the Education Council, the Philosophy of Education in Oman is based on the need for a high-quality education system that linked to lifelong learning, human



development and labour market (The Education Council 2017). This philosophy derives its basis from the identity of the Oman civilisation and characteristics of the Omani society. The philosophy requires that education initiatives should continuously align with the needs and aspirations of the Omani society, characteristics of the learners and future vision of the country. Oman education strategy 2040, set the overall vision for education focused on “*producing human resources who are equipped with skills required for work and life and to make them productive in this knowledge-based world*” (National Strategy of Education 2040, 2014, p.20). The development of a quality education system is considered as the major factor to achieve the overall vision derived from the principles of Oman education strategy.

The responsibility of quality in higher education in Oman is distributed among different stakeholders. The MoHE, OAAA and the HEIs are the main stakeholders responsible for developing a robust higher education system that focuses on producing high-quality graduates equipped with the required 21st-century competencies and relevant job market skills.

Currently, there are 56 HEIs operating in Oman; 28 out of them are private institutions. All HEIs including PHEIs in Oman are required to meet the educational growth parameters set by the government under the ‘National Strategy of Education -2040’. PHEIs need to become goal-efficient and work on the enhancement of both quality and quantity measures of education to meet these objectives (Gutachter, Teichler, Gutachter, & Kehm, 2011).

The government intention to build a robust and rigorous quality education in the country and in PHEIs particularly, has led into building a unique quality assurance system that relies heavily on external academic partnerships with international institutions (Wilkinson & Hajry, 2007). This intention was followed by formal legislation by MoHE requiring all private university colleges in Oman to have affiliation agreements with IUPs.



This legislation was in line with the government “aim” to produce quality graduates who are willing to compete nationally and globally. The rationale of this requirement was to ensure the quality of programmes delivered by these institutions (Al Harthy, 2012),

Accordingly, MoHE has requested all PHEIs (excluding private universities) to sign a formal agreement with an IUP, where the latter is responsible for developing a quality assurance mechanism to ensure that quality standards are met by the local partner (Al Harthy, 2012). The Ministerial Decree No. (34/2000) issued by the Minister of MoHE has identified the main characteristics of the academic affiliation and has emphasised building a collaborative framework where the Omani institution follow exactly or partially the partner university educational system, in which IUP is also responsible jointly or solely for awarding the final qualification. The affiliation agreements spell out the broader terms of references between both parties. Most PHEIs, in compliance with MoHE requirements, have signed academic affiliation agreements with IUPs; these include but are not limited to: identifying the role and responsibilities of each party, overall scope of services, resolution of disputes; and process of termination.

In the last two decades, MoHE has witnessed a great deal of development in the concept of academic affiliation, and different modes of affiliations came to light. Trevor-Roper, Razvi, & Goodliffe, (2013) were the first to identify the different affiliation models that exist in the Omani context. According to Trevor-Roper, et al (2013) the current existing modes are: Branch Campuses, Double/Joint Degree, Twinning (localised), Franchised Programs, Validated Programs, Distance/Open Learning (e-learning), Affiliation for quality assurance and Affiliate as consultant (Trevor-Roper, Razvi, & Goodliffe, 2013). These models have introduced different quality assurance arrangements between both parties and the involvement and contribution of IUPs differ from one to another. The variety of affiliation modes that are followed by PHEIs present problems in developing a standardised



quality monitoring framework for PHEIs.

Although the MoHE system has allowed for this variation in affiliation models, the extent to which each model contributes to the quality of teaching of offshore programmes has never been examined. Also, this diversity has created some problems in developing a standardised quality assurance framework for PHEIs, as they lead to different quality assurance arrangements between both parties, and varying involvement and contribution of the IUPs. Among the different affiliation models that exist in Oman, branch campus, franchised; and validation are the three modes of offshore programmes in Oman having maximum IUPs commitment in terms of quality assurance. This is mainly because the final qualifications in these models are awarded solely by the IUPs, and the local PHEIs work only as a facilitator of the education process (Sharp, 2017). Each model has its unique perspective on how the education system is structured. These models differ on the extent of localisation of the programme and the rigour required to award the final degree. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies on the extent to which these models contribute to the quality of teaching of offshore programmes.

Overview of Offshore Programmes

International Outlook

To explore the constraints highlighted earlier, it is necessary to understand the nature of offshore programmes. Offshore programmes in higher education can be considered as a subset of ‘cross-border’ education in the global context (Stella & Woodhouse, 2011).

Transnational higher education offered through offshore establishments in the host countries redefine the concepts of programme delivery and overcome the limitations of geography in education (Stella & Woodhouse, 2008). The term ‘transnational education’ was initially used



in Australia in the early nineties by recruiters to differentiate between Australian students and international students studying overseas to obtain a degree from Australia (Knight, 2005).

The offshore programmes researched in this study are aligned with the definition of transnational offshore programmes as defined by Knight (2006). She defines transnational offshore programmes as:

The movement of individual education/training courses and programmes across national borders through face-to-face, distance or a combination of these modes. Credits towards a qualification can be awarded by the sending foreign country provider or by an affiliated domestic partner or jointly. (Knight, 2006; p.23)

Globalisation, innovations in communication, and information technology have facilitated the spreading of international academic programmes across the globe (Zajda & Rust, 2016a). HEIs have become more entrepreneurial, and expanding overseas has become a key strategy for them to strive for global significance (University of Oxford, 2018). This transformation coupled with the need from host countries to improve their educational standards has resulted in the development of transnational HEIs. Transnational higher education provides a platform for international collaborations, the transnational mobility of scientific and technical personnel, linkage of R&D laboratories and better information exchange on research advancements (Reddy, 2002). It also provides the government scope for cultural diplomacy between nations through research collaboration or joint programmes (Hénard, 2010).

The common challenges in higher education are related to financing, quality improvement, meeting the needs of the community and the labour market, student enrolment,



staffing, and research funding (Glass, 2014). Offshore programmes are facing specific challenges apart from these common challenges. They face issues with the governance systems, intercultural partnerships, accreditation, teaching quality, qualification award, language, host country's local regulations; and sustainability (Knight, 2014). The policies and strategic directions of offshore programmes need to accommodate the national education policies, the cultural and political context of the host country. Host country regulations may impose constraints on the appointment of the governance boards and senior management team of the local institution (Zajda & Rust, 2016b). Accreditation of offshore programmes is another challenge and the quality assurance requirements of the host country may clash with that of IUPs and make accreditation compliance a complex issue. Complying with the requirements of two accrediting bodies can take a heavy toll on the human and financial resources of the offshore HEI (Ryan, 2015; Shams, 2016). These issues need attention when establishing a new HEI providing an offshore programme in a host country.

Offshore Programmes in PHEIs

PHEIs in Oman provides a wide range of programmes including Diploma, Bachelors and Masters. The activities of these PHEIs are governed by the stipulations of MoHE . PHEIs can offer a maximum of three major fields of study (MoHE, 2005). The privatisation of higher education in Oman was promoted to accommodate the increasing secondary graduates and improve national capacity (Al Shmeli, 2009; Baporikar & Shah, 2012; Salerno, 2004). Reduction of government funding for higher education has also contributed to the growth of PHEIs in Oman (Rust, Portnoi, Bagley, & Macmillan, 2010). Due to the above factors, PHEIs exceed public HEIs in Oman in terms of students population (McNamara & Knight, 2015). Most of the PHEIs in Oman have affiliations with IUPs in the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK). Six PHEIs are affiliated to Arab universities, i.e., from Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait; and Jordan. India and Malaysia are another two destinations for



collaboration that witnessed some growth in the last five years especially in postgraduate offshore programmes. PHEIs in Oman offer over 350 programmes which constitute around 43% of the total tertiary programmes (Higher Education Admission Centre, 2014). The programmes provided by PHEIs are mostly focused on human resource management, financial management and information technology (Hayes & Al'Abri, 2018; Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011).

Models of Offshore Programmes

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by WTO has classified transnational education services based on principles of market access, non-discrimination and equal treatment of market players (Knight, 2015). The GATS categorisation does not capture the variation and cross border mobility comprehensively. Also, the trade focus of GATS ignores the analysis of stakeholders, key players and implications of quality assurance of the transnational programmes (Knight, 2015). These limitations can be overcome by categorising the offshore programmes based on what moves across borders i.e. people, providers, programmes or projects & services.

This study investigated models of offshore programmes that involved face to face teaching delivered in host country campus whereas the final qualification is awarded by IUPs. These criteria are part of the mandatory affiliation requirements stipulated by MoHE and seen as important for enhancing education quality and achieving international standards in higher education. These criteria were established to maximise the benefits of different stakeholders such as students, government and PHEIs (Al Harthy, 2011). Based on these criteria, branch campus, franchised and validated models of offshore programmes were selected for this study. Branch campus moves education providers across the border and hence can be classified as model II as per Knight's (2015) categorisation. As per Model II terminology of Knight (2005), cross-border mobility is achieved by establishing branch campus, independent



institution or study centres in the host country by an IUP. Branch campus also can be categorised as Mode-III as per GATS provision as it involves establishing a facility in the host country. Validation and franchise models move programmes across the border and hence fall under model III as explained by Knight (2015). These models entail moving resources and intellectual property to the host country and hence have Mode-IV categorisation as per GATS provision. Following sections provide an overview of the main offshore programme models adopted in Oman.

Branch campus

In Branch Campus, the foreign institution or the IUP establishes a subsidiary in the host country (Knight, 2011) and this subsidiary is owned partially or fully by the IUP. In this model, IUP is entirely responsible for awarding the degree and monitoring the delivery of the degree through stringent and agreed set of quality assurance arrangements (Trevor-Roper, et al. 2013). Branch campuses normally accommodate students who have limited academic mobility options in their home country (Shields, 2004). Universities in the USA and Australia operate the largest number of branch campuses followed by the UK, Malaysia, and Singapore (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2011). Most of the branch campuses are located in the Middle East and South-East Asia. Branch campuses are set up either solely with funds from IUP, or funding support from the government or private parties in the host country. However, the trend of branch campuses set up solely by IUP funding is on the decline as IUPs are seeking more collaborative approaches (Verbik, 2015). Branch campuses may find it difficult to engage home faculty for a long period; therefore, some branches do not follow this scheme and utilise local faculty for teaching the hosted offshore programme. The intensive modules and limited curriculum offered by the branch campuses makes it a challenge to replicate the home campus learning quality and experience (Altbach, 2015). Branch campuses have the



advantage of providing students with the potential of engaging in community service projects that are international (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2011). In Oman, only one PHEI follows this model and the main campus is located in Kuwait; however, programmes are approved and endorsed by the main branch after stringent validation process from a university in the UK. Therefore, the main branch campus located in Oman is unique in term of its validation process as two HEIs are involved in these processes.

Franchised programme

Franchised programme is the fast developing and most common existing form of TNE (Knight, 2011). In the Franchise model, HEI of one country permits host institution to provide either part of or complete academic programme. Franchised programme has the advantage of allowing customisation of teaching, management, assessment, profit-sharing, qualification awarding according to the agreed scope of collaboration. However, the host country rules and regulations must be considered to ensure a successful relationship between the sending university and hosted institution (Knight, J, 2010). This form of affiliation also helps in accelerating modernisation and development of the higher education of the host country based on the guidelines of parent university (Shchukin, 2015). In Oman, the majority of PHEIs that have an affiliation with UK universities are following this model especially in postgraduate programmes (Trevor-Roper et al., 2013).

Validated programme

Omani PHEIs commonly use validated programmes as they provide more flexibility to the host institution to change and adapt the programme's content, study plans; and teaching methods. However, these changes are subject to certain approval protocols by the parent university. It may be noted that the parent university will remain the awarding body. In this form of affiliation, the parent university is still responsible for monitoring course content to



ensure quality management of the curriculum (Trevor-Roper et al., 2013). This model allows the host institution to design and deliver its own programmes that are not offered in the parent university. Knight (2007) pointed out various quality concerns in such programmes as the parent university remain the awarding degree although the programme is not offered in their premises (Knight, 2007). In these types of programmes, the host institution might not have enough technical support from the IUP since the latter might lack academic resources and expertise related to these programmes.

Stakeholders' Expectations of Offshore Programmes

Review of literature enabled understanding of the various stakeholders involved in higher education and their relative influence and importance on the quality of higher education. Freedman (1984) defined stakeholders as “*Any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organisation's objectives*” (Freedman, 1984, p.46, cited by Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). This definition reveals that a stakeholder is a claimant who is expectant of a positive outcome of the organization and an influencer of the positive outcome through decision-making and involvement. According to Mcgrath and Whitty (2015), stakeholders have three basic roles and functions to perform. These are the roles of a primary stakeholder who participates in the system as required for its sustenance; a secondary stakeholder, who acts as an acceptor of a required activity in the system; and third is the tertiary stakeholder who uses the output produced by any activity in the system (Mcgrath and Whitty, 2015). Stakeholders of the higher education in a country comprise of government authorities, students, teachers, management of HEIs, governance boards, parents, quality assurance agencies students and teachers' associations, employers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and community among others (Helle, Letshego, & Marinda, 2011). Paine and McCann (2009) classify stakeholders upon their relation to the HEIs into two



categories, internal and external stakeholders. This study explores the perceptions and the expectations of these two categories in the PHEIs. The government officials are selected to represent the external stakeholders. Lim (2008) highlights the role of the legislative powers of the stakeholders representing government, who oversee implementation of the policies and control fund disbursement, to ensure that quality of the education is maintained (Lim, 2008). Management, faculty and students are selected in this study to represent the internal stakeholders.

The role of management is considered pivotal for identifying and rectifying the issues affecting the performance of HEIs. The efficiency of management performance impacts the standing of the institution in the national and global level rankings. UNESCO's guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education further highlights the significance of the administrator's role in constructive and active realisation of the relevant courses provided in the country (UNESCO, 2005).

Review of existing literature also shows that there are limited studies exploring expectations by various stakeholders about offshore programmes in higher education. Studies on expectations of student stakeholders have focused mainly on student satisfaction and perception of quality. There are few studies to understand the experience and expectations of PHEI management staff who are responsible for managing the offshore programmes. This maybe attributed to the need for privacy of financial information, the short history of offshore programmes; and lack of information through informal exchanges (Lane, 2011). Studies reveal that PHEI managers face challenges to localise offshore programmes to meet host country needs and objectives (Healey, 2016; Lane, 2011). They are expected to manage the conflicting demands and interests of other stakeholders concerning localising curriculum and teaching staff, funding research, making profit, enhancing accountability and assuring quality. Such pressures may manifest due to IUPs desire to reduce the cost of programmes



delivery for the sake of maximising profit and at the same time taking the lead in controlling curriculum and quality. Additionally, there is a paucity of studies on the views of academic staff about the quality of offshore programmes, whereas plenty of studies exist pertaining their views on various quality issues in higher education (Nasser & Fresko, 2002).

In the higher education context, student satisfaction is a quality construct which is extensively studied (Prakash, 2018). A study of student satisfaction in eleven European countries found that interactions with colleagues, course content, library facility, quality of teaching quality and learning materials are the most important factors influencing student satisfaction in higher education (García-Aracil, 2009). Student satisfaction is also found to be dependent on their overall satisfaction as a customer, rather than the narrow confinement of learning experiences (Lapina, Roga, & Müürsepp, 2016). Social ambience and institution facilities, as well as comfort in the learning environment significantly influence student satisfaction in higher education (Wells & Daunt, 2011; Nadiri, Kandampully, & Hussain, 2009; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). However, it is to be noted that there are different views on linking education quality with student satisfaction. Excessive focus on student satisfaction can pose a threat to the quality of education, if the components are not weighted and measured for improving student learning (Cheng, Taylor, Williams, & Tong, 2016). This is because student satisfaction is a subjective attitude which is affected by expectations, emotions, and feelings. Clemes, Gan, & Kao (2008) argues that student satisfaction and service quality are two distinct but related aspects of higher education quality. Students perceive that teaching style, feedback quality on student performance during lessons and assignments, teacher-student relationships as important factors for quality teaching (Hill, Lomas & Macgregor, 2003).

Offshore Programmes and Quality

Quality Related Concepts

Quality is a contested concept in higher education as there is a lack of consensus in defining it (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015; Houston, 2008). Providers (financiers, community, taxpayers), product users (students), output users (employers, institutions) and employees of the sector (administrators, faculty) are the four key stakeholders relevant for quality in higher education (Bobby, 2014; Williams, 2018). These stakeholders define quality based on their interests and beliefs which leads to different interpretations of quality (Lapina et al., 2016; Sahney, Banwet, & Karunes, 2008). Another challenge is that the political, economic and social environment in which higher education operates is constantly changing. This necessitates considering quality as an active pursuit of excellence that is in constant flux (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Ewell, 2010; Prakash, 2018). Hence, comprehensively defining quality in higher education poses a challenge (Ryan, 2015; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007) as it needs to encompass the complex, abstract and manifold factors that are influencing quality (Parri, 2006).

Two main strategies were noted in the existing literature for defining the quality of higher education by Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford (2015). The first strategy involves constructing a broad definition that focuses on one central goal or outcome (Tam, 2014; Scott, 2010). The second strategy is to define quality based on specific indicators that reflect desired inputs and outputs (Stankevičienė & Vaiciukevičiūtė, 2016; Tambi, Ghazali, & Yahya, 2008). Alternatively, quality in higher education can be characterised by the nature and contributions of the stakeholders towards academic achievements and the creation of intellectual property (Law, 2010). This approach values academic contributions more than educational outcomes. Education outcome relates to student quality in terms of subject



learning, knowledge application; and their ability to advance professionally (Harden, Crosby, & Davis, 1999). Quality in higher education is also conceptualised as the quality of student-faculty interaction (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). This view is based on empirical findings that student-faculty interaction influences student engagement and consequently enables cognitive development and self-challenge of the student.

In the existing literature, the definitions of quality in higher education may be broadly classified into four categories, these are: exceptional, purposeful, transformative and accountable (Schindler et al., 2015). Quality is defined as being exceptional when exhorting the higher education institutions to attain better outcomes than the rest and be the best (Martin & Stella, 2007; Harvey & Green, 1993; Lomas, 2002). This definition does not specify what is meant by quality or set standards for measurement. Definition of quality as purposeful or fit for purpose is the most frequently used definition in higher education (Tam, 2014; Nicholson, 2011). This definition mandates assessment of HEIs functionality and activities against the set goals and objectives that best meet different higher education stakeholders' expectations. Also, this definition postulates that stakeholders can state their needs and their interest in higher education clearly. If the set goals do not contain human development in higher education, then this definition can lead to efficient but not effective quality outcomes (Westerheijden, 1999).

Quality in education is also defined as students transformation during the course to manage their professional life better (Harvey, 1995; Singh, 2010; Walker, Steinfort, & Maqsood, 2014). Though students are the focus of this definition, it supposes that outstanding universities can achieve the biggest influence on student transformation process (Tam, 2001). Quality enhancement in higher education stresses the need for constant improvements to assure better education. This definition affixes the responsibility of the quality of academic staff and stresses the concept of academic liberty and independence (Harvey & Green, 1993).



When quality is defined with reference to accountability, it encourages establishing a threshold for the standards and targets that must be surpassed to meet the quality norms (Law, 2010; Martin, 2007; Westerheijden, 1999). The use of standards and targets make this definition more objective. Different methods are used to ensure accountability in higher education, these include self-assessment, peer review, external quality audits, accreditation; and performance indicators (Law, 2010). However, in a dynamic environment, standards are difficult to be adapted, and emphasis on crossing the threshold results in ensuring only the minimum quality requirements.

Quality is moving away from being defined mechanistically to encompass cultural viewpoints and being all-inclusive (Ehlers, 2009). This direction put emphasis on the higher education institutions to develop capabilities to master change rather than becoming proficient in quality assurance instruments (Krcal, Glass and Tremblay, 2014).

Differences in contexts, education systems, and student learning attributes due to varying geographical location and learning atmosphere compared to the home campus makes defining quality of transnational offshore programmes more complex (Shams, 2017). These differences in contexts present a challenge to offshore programmes for meeting the requirements of local and international standards simultaneously (Hou, 2014). Host countries perceive offshore programme quality based on IUP ability to provide local students with a learning experience that is equivalent to their home campus. Also, IUP ability to equip students with the relevant skills needed to compete in the local market, hence, contributing in building national capacity (McBurnie, 2008).

There is an understanding that quality of offshore programmes is contingent on the ability to provide an equivalent learning environment in the host country by ensuring facilities and services like the home campus of IUP (Smith, 2010). The physical distance



between IUP home campus and PHEI in the host country is detrimental to the quality of offshore programmes (Edwards, Crosling, & Edwards, 2010).

The geographical distance put constraints on the IUP to effectively monitor the teaching/assessment standards, quality of student intake, financial stability of their local partner and appropriateness of programme marketing.

A PHEI offering offshore programme combines the dimensions of transnational business and social service provider (Healey, 2016). Thus, offshore education requires effective coordination and communication between different parties to deliver quality education that meets the expectations of the concerned stakeholders. This has led some scholars to propose a stakeholder focused model for defining and assuring quality in transnational education (Houston and Paewai, 2013; Stalmeijer, Whittingham, DeGrave, & Dolmans, 2016). This model considers stakeholders' cooperation, communication, and engagement as important factors to the success of offshore programmes in higher education. This model focuses on how value is delivered based on the expectations of stakeholders (Shams, 2016). A stakeholder focus considers student engagement as an important indicator of quality (John, Karen & Stoodley, 2013). It also emphasises knowing students' current and future needs through interaction, cooperation and participation for upholding the quality of education provided.

Adoption of stakeholders' orientation to quality will necessitate IUPs to integrate local norms, values, culture in the curriculum of offshore programmes to enable local students to interact effectively with these courses by reflecting on their own context. The needs and interests of external stakeholders such as government, quality assurance agencies, industry, and media of the host country should be considered while defining the quality of offshore education through stakeholder satisfaction lens (Shah, 2012). These stakeholders can



reinforce or damage the reputation of PHEIs based on their perception of quality in offshore programmes (Shams, 2017).

The level of trust the community has on the higher education and the level of social commitment of the PHEI in a host country are indicatives of the quality of the offshore programme (Bengoa & Kaufmann, 2015). Thus, the ability of an offshore programme to maximise value for all stakeholders and meet their expectations through participation, co-operation, and interaction is a good indication for its quality (Waterval, Frambach, Oudkerk Pool, Driessen, & Scherpbier, 2016). This description of quality in an offshore programme closely aligns with the purposeful definition of quality in higher education (Tam, 2014).

The multifaceted nuances of the quality in offshore higher education are most appropriately contained in the definition of quality in higher education by UNESCO. This definition states that:

Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. (Harvey, 2006; pp 2)

The above definition suits this study as it addresses the localisation requirement envisaged by the government (Philosophy of Education, 2017) and elevating the quality standards of offshore programmes to international standards (MoHE, 2015). In the context of this study, quality is viewed as a concept in terms of culture and as a mechanism in terms of the quality assurance process (Harvey, 2006).

Quality Dimensions

Breaking down quality into various dimensions or categories enables understanding of various levels involved for strategic quality management (Garvin, 1987). Offshore programmes have complex dimensions of quality interacting in varied contexts (Enders, 2012; Shams, 2017). Studies specific to understanding quality dimension in offshore programmes are mainly from the IUPs perspectives and have limited studies from a host country perspective. The quality dimensions in higher education may be classified as internal and external factors (Baporikar and Shah, 2012). Internal factors that determine the quality of higher education consist of foundation course standards, teaching methods, educational curriculum, faculty quality, and infrastructure facilities (Pavel, 2012). The external factors comprise the educational system, student learning profile and national regulations (Al Mamari, 2012). This classification is helpful when ascertaining the accountability and responsibility of various stakeholders in the offshore programme.

Quality in higher education is evaluated mainly by measuring the student outcomes, i.e., the output or student satisfaction. However, this static measurement approach fails to evaluate the quality of offshore programme practices to foster student engagement (Gibbs, 2010). This approach fails to measure the process variables that influence student engagement and output. Student satisfaction is also subjective and hence may be ineffective to assess the performance of academic staff (Cheng et al., 2016). In this context, a systemic understanding of the variables influencing education quality acquires importance, though it may be difficult to quantify and measure some process variables. Gibbs (2010) has categorised the quality dimensions in higher educations into three levels, i.e., *presage*, *process and product* based on the "3P" model by Biggs (1993). Overall, this framework enables a systemic understanding of the factors influencing the quality of education.



Presage dimensions

Presage consists of four quality dimensions, i.e., quality of teaching staff, student-staff ratios, quality of students and funding. The quality and commitment of teaching staff influence student performance and the quality of teaching. Faculty in a PHEI offering offshore programmes need to be abreast with the global and national developments influencing offshore higher education programmes (Snoek & Žogla, 2009). Also, faculty in PHEIs offering offshore programmes need to have high transcultural competency (Francois, 2015). This is because the policies, curriculum, and quality assurance of the education process can improve the quality of learning only when the teachers can impart the required knowledge and skills to their students (Zaki & Rashidi, 2013) and programme content is relevant to the local context.

Low student-staff ratio improves student performance as it enables close interaction with faculty and enables them to provide better feedback to students. However, it may be noted that low student-staff ratio does not guarantee feedback or feedback quality. Quality of the feedback may be constrained by the faculty experience and policies of the institute (Gibbs and Dunbar- Goddet, 2009). When characteristics of students during programme entry is considered, student performance is seen mostly unrelated to the staff-student ratio (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994).

Quality of students enrolling in the offshore programme is an important factor as there is a high correlation between student performance and learning achievement before enrolling in the programme (Andrade, 2016; Snyman, 2013; Smith and Naylor, 2005). Prior knowledge, disposition and learning ability (Hay, Kinchin, & Lygo-Baker, 2008) as well as behaviour and values (Andrade, 2016; Kohont & Nadoh Bergoc, 2010) tend to impact the success of a student in offshore programmes. Development of a learner's profile enables the creation of learner specific programmes (Snyman, 2013) that enable students to overcome



learning barriers formed due to negative experiences or fear of failure among students (Zaki & Rashidi, 2013).

Funding influences offshore programme quality as it affects the capacity of the institution, class size, quality of teachers, provisions of affordable learning resources (Bound and Turner, 2007). Though studies have not been able to establish a causal relationship between funding and student performance (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005); however, student performance is influenced when funds are used for faculty training, enhancing academic support, developing learning centres (Gibbs, 2010). The infrastructure facilities are a vital component of the internal environment of a HEI as it influences the index of quality assurance (Vidalakis, Sun, & Papa, 2013). Facilities such as building design, space availability, and leverage of advanced technology ensure comfort, safety, and accessibility for the students in the process of attaining education (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011).

Process dimensions

The process dimensions focus mainly on the effectiveness of different educational aspects such as *quality of teaching, class size, teaching hours (direct and indirect), research environment, students' engagements, level of intellectual challenge, quality enhancement process and; formative assessments and feedback* (Gibbs, 2010, p.19). Quality of teaching in this dimension is considered as an important quality aspect. An effective pedagogy enhances new learning among students by creating a stimulating learning environment and encouraging reflective action and thought (Pavel, 2012). The interaction of faculty in an offshore higher education programme needs to be responsive towards the diverse cultural backgrounds present in the HEI (Francois, Avoseh, and Griswold, 2016).

Class size has an impact on student performance and student engagement quality. Students tend to memorise rather than understand in a large class (Lucas, Gibbs, Hughes,



Jones, & Wisker, 1997). Student participation that occurs in a large class tends to focus on clarification of facts rather than an exploration of ideas (Báles, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951). The student-teacher relationship also deteriorates in a large class as a teacher has to reduce the time for students' feedback and interaction outside classrooms (Henard, 2008; Gibbs and Jenkins, 1992). Close student-teacher interactions, especially on a personal basis, are important for student learning and performance (Pascarella, 1980). However; this may be challenging to achieve in the offshore programmes as classroom sizes are typically large. The large class size may also constrain the ability to introduce problem-based teaching that normally works better in small groups.

The quality of student engagement during classroom hours significantly influences student learning (Gibbs, 2010). Student effort that includes the classroom and independent hours of study is an important indicator of student engagement and a good predictor of student performance (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The process variables influencing student engagement are the academic challenges in the course, active and participative learning, and the nature and extent of student-faculty interaction (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, 1991). Student feedback and formative assessment are another important quality dimension that influences student performance. A large amount of formative assessment is seen to encourage serious efforts by students (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009), additionally, it enhances student retention (Yorke, 2001). However, the cost and time constraints for assessment and feedback increases when the class size of the course increases.

Curriculum also influences the student learning process along with student-teacher interactions (Andrade, 2016). The curriculum enables links between the experience of various stakeholders of education, such as students, university administration, and faculty and thereby enhances the student experience by stimulating the creation of innovative ideas (Fung, 2017). A curriculum that focuses on the ability of the learner, society requirements and motivates



students to acquire enhanced knowledge can enhance education quality (Shah and Baporikar, 2010). A localised curriculum enhances student learning as it considers the student characteristics, styles and cultural disposition of the local students (Amiel, Squires, & Orey, 2009). Curriculum localisation is an important quality variable in offshore high education for establishing a learning culture by acting as a facilitator for an interactive learning and teaching process (Totté & Huyghe, 2010). This can be achieved by making its design responsive to the economy, cultural environment, social environment, and prevailing education standards of the host country (O'Neill, Albin, Storey, Horner, & Sprague, 2015).

The ability of a student to bridge the gap between school achievements and higher education requirements is influenced by the level of student support (Andrade, 2016; Kohont & Nadoh Bergoc, 2010). The quality and affordability of this support is again dependent on the number of students served. It may be noted that student support facilities are highly context and purpose-specific. Student support in terms of study skills improvement, mentoring and counselling, language enhancements affect the quality of offshore education (OAAA, 2003). English language support is a very important factor in Oman context, as secondary schooling is mainly in Arabic medium and the majority of higher education programmes in HEIs are in English (Baporikar & Shah, 2012).

Product dimensions

Product dimensions consist of the students' performance and degree classification, student retention, and employability and graduate destinations. Student performance as final grades of students in their study is considered as one of the indications on the quality of teaching. Although moderation processes and external examiners role help in ensuring the reliability of students' grades, however, some institutions do not follow proper processes in ascertaining that teachers do not inflate marks during their assessment. This uncertainty in the



grading and assessment of degrees renders them ineligible for comparison with the international partner (Gibbs, 2010).

Student retention in the form of persistence to complete the course is an indicator of the quality of the education process. The profile of the student such as past education performance, residence on campus, paid work to support study is seen to influence student retention (Paton-Saltzberg and Lindsay, 1993). Retention also depends on the social and academic integration of the student (Tinto, 1975). Efforts by the HEIs to identify need and timing for the student support services improve retention (Barefoot, 2004). The ability of a graduate to get immediate employment in their chosen field and with salary levels that justify their investment in higher education is another indication of the education quality (Smith et al., 2000), however; this indication might be affected if the unemployment rate in a country is high due to other political or economic constraints.

From the earlier discussion, it is obvious that quality in offshore programmes is a complex construct that is influenced by various factors, contextual demands, and cultural pressures. A practical solution for judging quality in offshore programmes will be through using the expectations and demands of various interested groups as a criterion (Houston, 2008). This approach also allows accommodating the perspectives of different stakeholders. Insight about various approaches that allow improving the quality of education is required to evaluate the quality practices of the institutions studied in this research. The process of inculcating quality in education would require consciousness, knowledge; and skills to understand the prevailing conditions and critically evaluate the existing approaches to make it superior. The details of the practices that improve education quality in HEIs as informed by literature are provided henceforth.



Quality Assessment and Accountability

Nature and Importance

Quality assurance refers to “*the policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced*” (Woodhouse, 1999, p.30 cited in Nicholson, 2011). Principles of control, accountability, and improvement are the core elements for assuring the quality of different activities in higher education (Law, 2010; Harvey, 1999). Quality assurance enables monitoring and control of existing processes, fosters curriculum design and improvement (Tambi et al., 2008) and augment learning outcomes (Welsh and Dey, 2002) to ensure accountability and continuously improve the quality of education (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Amaral, 2007). Quality assurance consists of internal and external quality activities that ensure quality maintenance and improvement in the HEIs. Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the efforts exerted by the HEI to improve its internal environment and processes which include the effectiveness of the learning and teaching process (Cheng, 2011). On the other hand, external quality assurance (EQA) refers to activities such as quality audits, accreditation, and external assessments that are normally conducted by a third party who is external to the institution (Sahney et al., 2008). Quality assurance activities are focused on investigating, analysing, assessing and supporting various systems, procedures, and mechanisms that influence the maintenance and improvement of education quality (Wahlén, 2004).

The quality of higher education in a country contributes to its economic and social well-being (Vincent-lancrin & Pfothenauer, 2008). Hence, quality assurance of offshore programmes acquires importance from the perspective of different authorities in the host country. The quality of offshore programmes impacts on the success of the local PHEI offering the programme. Effective implementation of different quality assurance mechanisms

increases the trust in offshore programmes (Stensaker and Maassen, 2015) and strives to meet the needs and expectations of related stakeholders such as students, industry and fund providers (Lomas, 2002). Also, it enables management to ensure customer satisfaction based on principles of value for money, policies encouraging best practices, graduate quality and compliance to external standards (Telford & Masson, 2005). Quality philosophy and systems in the offshore programme provide focus and guidance to the interactions consisting of demands for more accountability by external stakeholders and efforts by stakeholders internal to the offshore institution to meet these expectations and needs (Koslowski, 2006).

Accountability

Accountability in quality assurance of higher education refers to requests and demands for the demonstration of valuable outcomes (Martin & Stella, 2007). Accountability, therefore, requires measurement metrics or performance indicators to provide information about the inputs and outputs or outcomes involved in the offshore programme (Nicholson, 2011). Accountability processes are oriented to examine the appropriateness of the institution's objectives, the suitability of programme plans, and the compliance of actions plans taken to respond to these objectives (Woodhouse, 1999). Benefits of improving accountability include enhancing transparency in the system, establishing a just appraisal system (Anderson, 2005), ensuring compliance with regulations (Leveille, 2005) and enabling rewarding and appreciation possibilities (Jaafar & Earl, 2008).

Furthermore, accountability needs to consider the concerns and perspectives of other stakeholders (Romzek, 2000). To demonstrate accountability, HEIs are endeavouring for a high level of competitiveness and social, commercial and environmental sustainability (Rodríguez-Solera & Silva-Laya, 2017). The approaches for regulating offshore programmes depends on the level of involvement of relevant stakeholders within the system, i.e., the host country government, partners in the offshore programme, academic professionals and the



market (Dill, 2003). The government of the host countries expects a PHEI offering offshore programmes to be accountable to their students and society for the education quality and resource utilisation (Martin & Stella, 2007). At the same time, the local policies of the host country governing higher education are influenced by the international phenomenon of globalisation, the evolution of knowledge economies and learning societies (Weir, 2009).

Globalisation has given rise to borderless education or transnational education based on the neo-liberal ideology of free movement of goods and capital for universal peace and prosperity (Amaral, 2007). This development has raised the issue of consumer protection with respect to adequate information available to all stakeholders. This focus on customer protection is also emphasised by the New Public Management (NPM) vision, where the government is run akin to a private enterprise using values of a business (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). NPM views students as customers and quality assurance as a tool to ensure that HEIs meet clients' needs. Increased globalisation and burgeoning societal needs, intensified privatisation of education and redefining the government roles, globalisation and trade agreements, borderless markets for higher education and international market for quality assurance services have aroused the need of external monitoring and audits for higher education (Stella & Liston, 2008).

These influences have brought forward a new rationale for monitoring quality in higher education. Governments use the following three concurrent characteristics of higher education to regulate the higher education field (Amaral, 2007). The first characteristic is that education quality can be assessed only when a student takes part in it and not before. Students will come to know about the quality of the learning experience only once they start attending the classes. The second characteristic is that higher education is a rare and mostly one-time purchase, i.e., frequent changes are not feasible. The third characteristic of higher education is that it is costly to opt out from a higher education course. Hence student and their parents



need to have enough information to ensure that they are selecting a quality course. Therefore, governments endeavour to provide information on quality assessment outcomes of different HEIs to the public. Availability of quality assessment outcomes enable students, parents, HEIs and other relevant stakeholders to make better decisions about their higher education future direction. Through such practices, the government is using market mechanisms for intervening in the operation of higher education programmes and protecting the interests of students and parents. It also promotes competition in higher education and consequently increases efficiency. The government also uses quality assurance as a tool for ensuring compliance of higher education institutions to its higher education policies. This is due to the understanding that autonomous institutions functioning in a competitive market work for their profit and survival at the cost of public good (Massy, 2004).

Accreditation and quality audits are the two systems used to develop evidences for accountability of offshore programmes. Quality audits are based on fit for purpose concept, and normally these audits end up with a set of recommendations, commendations, and affirmations. There is no fail or pass results in an audit. Accreditation evaluates the HEIs performance against set standards and checking on whether HEIs meet these standards sufficiently. Accreditation normally is a pass or fail process. Oman is following both quality systems. However, accreditation is extensively used in Oman to ensure accountability. In Oman, institutional accreditation results come under five categories. These are: Accredited with merit, Accredited, Provisionally Accredited, Under Probation or Fail.

A quality audit involves checking whether all the systems and structures of the institution are in place and working as planned (Tam, 2001). Audits usually are carried out by external parties to ensure transparency and objectivity. External quality audit is controversial as there are supporters and opponents for this mechanism (Weir, 2009). The supporters of external audit based their support on the observation that it can act as a catalyst for



improvements in quality and validate the quality efforts by HEI (Carr. et al., 2005). There is a broad consensus on the fact that the system of quality control and quality audits have infused vigilance, transparency, and accountability in the educational institutions. (Issan, 2016).

Institutions are now allowing international agencies to audit their institutions to gain international recognition for their internal quality practices (Shah & Nair, 2013). The above openness is resulting from the management of offshore programmes underpinned by the impact of globalisation, neo-liberalisation, sustainability, and culture. These elements allowing external agencies to monitor quality and to transform higher education institutions from self-governed institutions responsible for their quality towards quality assurance accounted by external agencies (Weir, 2009). Student learning outcomes of an offshore programme can be improved by complimenting external audits findings with internal management initiatives (Carr et al., 2005). These improvements will be materialised only if they are aligned with the conditions in the external environment, and capacities and motivations for change in the PHEI (Liu, 2013).

External quality audits have the potential to improve the systems and processes of the educational institutions but can also restrict responsiveness and innovation (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Focusing solely on external audits to enhance quality may not improve the student experience (Shah, 2012). There is an emerging trend of adopting the organisational culture and commercial norms and perspectives into quality audits to improve efficacy and be responsive to the needs of all stakeholders (Lapina et al., 2016). The establishment of a greater number of institutions at national and international level have catalysed the need of quality check to protect consumers along with the assurance of achieving national development goals (Martin & Stella, 2007). External audits have enhanced answerability of the respective institutional authorities for fostering innovative student-teacher thread systems, envisaged effective discussions on the various issues impeding the communication and



desired outcomes and disclosed information about best practices both across the system and within the institutions (Shah, Lewis, & Fitzgerald, 2011).

Accreditation ascertains whether an institution or offshore programme meets the threshold criteria of quality (Nicholson, 2011). Accreditation examines the mission, resourcing levels, and processes of the offshore institution or programme to meet the planned outcomes. Accreditation is one method to assure quality as it ensures that the institution satisfies certain status. Accreditation evaluates whether the institution achieves standards related to learning resources, teacher qualifications, research and intake of students (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007). Accreditations can be for all programmes and institutions covered under the assessment. There is a trend of moving towards institutional wide accreditation rather than programme specific accreditation, due to the cost factors associated with programme accreditation (Nicholson, 2011).

Assessing Teaching Quality

Teachers play the most critical part in facilitating high-quality education (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & Colle, 2010). However, measuring teaching quality is challenging as it is difficult to establish a causal link between teaching and learning (Henard, 2010). Student learning outcomes can be used for evaluation of teaching quality (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). Student portfolio assessment is also another approach that can be used for assessing teaching quality. However, these tools are criticised as students' portfolios are not standardised, and the assessment of a large population is not feasible (Shavelson & Klein, 2009). Performance indicators also another quality tool that provides an objective assessment of teaching quality. The variables that can be easily and accurately measured such as teaching hours, student scores, class size, and computers used can be gathered and analysed in the performance indicator tool. A study by Rice (2003) describes five measurable characteristics that reflect on the quality of teachers. This includes “*teacher experience, teacher preparation*



programmes and degrees, type of teacher certification, specific coursework taken in preparation for the profession, and teachers' test scores" (Rice, 2003, p.5). The research notes that teachers' experience, educational background, and training attended have a positive impact on their course delivery; however, certifications do not have a significant impact on the effectiveness of teachers. Observations also corroborate that teacher inducted through alternative pathways to address teacher shortages have comparable performance (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006). Another study conducted by Okapala and Ellis (2005) highlighted other important teaching attributes that are perceived as relevant to the quality of teaching. This study focused on students' perceptions about their views on the main components of a quality teacher. The study concluded that teaching skills, commitments, content knowledge; and verbal communication skills are the most important components affecting the students' learning process (Okapala and Ellis, 2005).

Quality Improvement in Offshore Programmes

Improving quality in an offshore programme requires the collaboration of the stakeholders as the transnational alliance requires the sharing of external risks that requires collaboration for mitigation and uncertainties as well as opportunities for improvement (Soontiens & Pedigo, 2013). Collaboration between partners of the offshore programme is required to exploit specific capabilities, improving reputation and identifying synergies that enable meeting stakeholder expectations and increasing efficiency (Dickie & Dickie, 2009).

Improvement in quality will result with the participation of students, commitment and leadership of management staff, effective design of quality systems, management of education process, and involvement of teaching and supporting staff (Psomas and Antony, 2017). Martin & Stella (2007) note that a culture that encourages voluntary mechanism is



more effective than compulsory participation for achieving quality improvement. The reasoning for this approach is that improvements can be achieved only when it is motivated and committed to managing the quality assurance process. External quality assurance can become a tool for quality enhancement provided there is a strong academic commitment (Martin & Stella, 2007). However, this will also require a system to monitor and control minimum standards if there are low-quality institutions in the system. It is noted that excessive focus on continuous quality improvement creates dysfunction in the system due to non-integration of all elements of the quality assurance process (Manatos et al., 2017).

Improving teachers' skills is vital to enhance teaching quality in higher education. Initial training and professional development are the basic instruments to improve teacher skills (Krcal, Glass and Tremblay, 2014). Initiatives such as mentoring teachers, establishing centres of teaching excellence, a framework for teaching standards and benchmarking will also enable to improve teaching quality, which consequently improves education quality. Promoting teaching excellence awards to recognise teachers who have an outstanding impact on student learning is an important endeavour to motivate them for better teaching quality (European Commission, 2018). As per Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008), usage of modern technologies, modification in the teacher-student interactions, student-centred pedagogic approaches, support to minority students and provision of student counselling are important tools to improve quality teaching, but they are still under-employed. Student satisfaction surveys can be used as a development tool to increase teaching effectiveness and improve programme management (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). However, less than 10% of the teachers consider student feedback and make changes to their teaching (Nasser & Fresko, 2002).



Quality Challenges in Offshore Programmes

Quality assurance in the academic world has two contradicting aims, i.e., improvement of quality and ensuring accountability (Amaral, 2007). Accountability and improvement processes in quality assurance are based on quality paradigms that are philosophically opposed (Nicholson, 2011). Quality assurance systems in higher education systems are primarily oriented to monitor and maintain quality, as they have accountability objective as the main driving force. Due to this pre-occupation with accountability, quality assurance processes tend to constrain innovation in teaching and learning rather than advancing it. This has led to the criticism that any improvement in educational quality that is attributable to quality assurance efforts is only incidental (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Houston, 2008; Law, 2010). This inference is due to the belief that quality assurance processes focused on accountability does not foster the openness of the education system that is essential for improving education quality (Woodhouse, 1999).

The demand for accountability by authorities and desire for autonomy by the academics induce tensions in the organisational dynamics of the HEI (Srikanthan, 2002). Institutions desire for the freedom to govern and manage to develop a sustainable organisation, while authorities seek performance of the institutions that are aligned with the national objectives, social goals, and economic objectives. The business and cultural dimensions of the offshore programme can be fulfilled only if it is successful in the core objective, i.e., providing quality learning. The relation of an HEI offering offshore programmes with the governments of the host and home nations influences educational quality (Lane & Kinser, 2011). A private HEI offering courses without collaboration with an IUP needs only to meet the demands and requirement of the host country government. Studies evidence that perspectives of the home nation and host nation about the profitability of offshore programme and meeting society needs may clash. An offshore programme may



be considered as 'for profit' economic activity by the home nation of IUPs, but the hosting HEI might consider it as public service to meet national demands. Studies on Qatar shows that an offshore international branch campus can engage in more activities for the public good than initiatives by IUP in the main campus at home (Lane & Kinser, 2011). Such cases challenge the conventional wisdom that private offshore programmes may not fulfil public purposes.

The intentions of the partners forming the offshore education institutions can constrain the quality assurance efforts of the institutions (Waterval et al., 2016). There can be challenges in achieving higher education management goals if the high operating costs are not economical for the host institution. Hudzik and Stohl (2012) highlighted the challenge faced by the PHEI's in the host country when they concentrate more on revenue than the academic quality of the offshore programme. A PHEI established for cross-border education involves a partnership with an entity in the host country, and a reputed higher education institution in a foreign country. Due to the transnational nature of the establishment, both the partners will experience the inadequacies and inefficiencies of international business. The eclectic paradigm is a later development of the economics of internationalisation theory (Rugman, 2008) that explains these tensions. This paradigm explains why firms opt to internationalise their business with deep commitments rather than superficial commitments through trade and licensing (Guimon, 2016). As per this paradigm, there are three crucial factors essential for establishing a transnational business. These factors are related to ownership, location, and internalisation (Morrison, 2003). In the case of offshore programmes, the internalisation would require decisions on providing licenses on one end or getting actively involved in the management and operation of the institution. Successfully managing these three factors is essential for the success of the affiliated institution (Cantwell, 2015).



Offshore programmes call for collaborative curriculum partnerships to ensure equivalence of curricula and learning experiences in both host country and home campuses. The demands for localisation by the host country creates tensions in the design and development of curriculum. A balance between adaptation and equivalence can be achieved by the partners focusing on achieving similarity in educational outcomes rather than on using similar teaching methods. McBurnie and Ziguras (2007) observed that offshore higher education institutions might not be able to provide the same level of education as in the parent campus. Functioning in foreign countries brings challenges such as language difference, societal mindset, and territorial norms that make the functioning of foreign institutions across the national borders difficult. Increase in transnational education through offshore higher education programmes has resulted in challenges to the field of quality assurance. The host country authorities are not familiar or equipped to assess the quality of imported programmes. There is also ambiguity in managing the new managers of these private institutions that are not part of the host country quality schemes (Knight, 2010). Ziguras (2007) notes that the process of internationalisation poses challenges to IUP in assuring the quality of its overseas programmes. Recognition of qualifications by the PHEI is important for all the relevant stakeholders. The degree credentials awarded to the student by PHEI needs to be legitimate and recognised globally. International agreements such as General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and Higher Education recognise the commercial potential of higher education and seeks to regulate it. The increasing demand for higher education and regulation based on international trade law is putting pressure on the image of higher education as a means of the greater good (Knight, 2012).

If the quality of the programme is not designed as per the need of the host economy, it would only benefit the country's academic standards in the short-run but will not be able to provide sustainable growth in the longer period. Chen (2014) proposes that offshore



programmes provide more importance to developing the educational quality of the host country over the role of developing multiculturalism in the host economy. Training and retention of the skilled national workforce is a top priority in the Middle East context. This is due to the high proportion of young population and unemployment. This situation presents a challenge to a PHEI providing offshore programmes to devise a course that is responsive to national needs but also respects the local social norms and values (Knight, 2012). The current obsession with global rankings is tempting students to pursue education overseas to improve their career prospects. If the host country is unable to provide high quality higher education within its borders, academic mobility will occur in the form of students crossing borders (INQAAHE, 2010).

Increased access for students is a driver for cross-border education. However, maintaining equity of student access to these offshore higher education programmes is a challenge. This is because these offshore programmes are accessible only for students who can afford them and have proficiency in the English language. Meeting the academic and language requirement of the PHEIs is a challenge to the local students in the Middle East context (Knight, 2012). Improvement in the educational infrastructure in Oman has led to increasing gross enrolment ratio in both secondary and tertiary higher education segment in Oman since 2008. This increase in the enrolment has also increased the diversity of students joining higher education institutions in Oman in terms of culture, expectation, qualification, and motivation. These factors tend to impact the success of the student in an enhanced learning atmosphere provided by transnational institutions (Andrade, 2016). A report by the World Bank (2012) indicated that the standards of secondary education in Oman is not as high as the government would like to maintain. This misalignment of secondary education with the entry requirements of higher education is forcing the majority of students to take foundation courses to enhance their standing in some areas of general knowledge like



English, Mathematics, Study Skills, and Information Technology which are basic prerequisites and requirements to enrol in higher educational institutions. Studies have shown that learner's profile is influential in determining the outcome of higher education (Snyman, 2013). Thus, offshore programmes face various challenges to accommodate national needs and shortcomings. However, offshore programmes also need to accommodate emerging trends in higher education to be relevant and to align with contemporary concepts of quality. A review of emerging trends in offshore education programmes follows next.

Emerging Trends

The instruments and tools for quality assurance in an offshore programme are introduced mostly without consideration of the cultural context (Ehlers, 2009). Quality assurance procedures in higher education take only partial consideration of the various factors and parameters that influence education quality (Lapina et al., 2016). This deficiency arose as quality approaches were focused on bringing compliance of organisation process to regulations or assessing the outcome of the education process or develop student capabilities (Houston, 2008). The modular approach of separating organisational processes for describing them to institution quality assurance steps resulted in this situation. These technocratic, top-down approaches based on process control caused frequent failures in higher education (Sursock, 2011). These failures are encouraging a new generation of approaches in quality assurance based on Henry Mintzberg (1994) proposition that organisation change is emergent and results from the competence of employees and organisational culture. In these approaches, quality management systems, tools, and instruments, competencies, values are considered holistically. This understanding demands that organisation culture based on shared values, individual competencies and professionalism is used for quality assurance in a higher education programme. This requirement for achieving and enhancing quality entrust



importance to developing the capability to mastering change, developing professionalism and individual capabilities, and promoting participation (Wolff, 2009). These approaches are changing quality assurance practices by replacing control with change management, assurance with organisational development and compliance with innovation (Law, 2010). In this new approach to defining and achieving educational quality, the mechanistic approach to pre-defined quality by experts is substituted by quality perspectives that emerge through open participation and negotiation of stakeholders. This approach allows developing a holistic approach to quality assurance framework that incorporates cultural demands, competencies, vision, and values of all stakeholders (Shams, 2017).

Demands for greater accountability and measures of output in quality assurance has led to enhanced focus on outcome-based education (Gibbs, 2010). The outcome-based perspective of quality assurance relates to education approach that focuses on curriculum decisions driven by student outcome (Harden *et al*, 1999). The decisions related to the curriculum are related to its content, structure, teaching methods, assessment process, and timetable. This goal requires the development of a description of the desired qualities and attributes of the graduates to articulate the role and purpose of any academic programme (Barrie, 2006). An academic programme based on outcome-based approach will contain statements that specify the intention of the learning process in terms of objectives and values. It will also lay out a strategy to achieve the learning intentions and criteria for assessing learning (Jackson, 2002). Outcome-based learning provides various advantages to stakeholders, i.e., administrators, instructors, educational developers, and students (Tam, 2014). Also, it provides a mechanism to ensure accountability and enables the accreditation of new and existing programmes. Enhancing teaching and learning by empowering students for their learning is an excellent approach (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This approach also clearly



articulates the learning and achievement of the student in terms of skills, knowledge, and experience from the education programme (Streveler, Smith, & Pilotte, 2012; Tam, 2014). Overall, the emerging trends in higher education point out several approaches that rely on developing an organisational culture that harnesses the skills and energy of all stakeholders through open participation and change management. These approaches strive to ensure quality by empowering students for their academic outcomes and life transformation. The quality assurance process of an offshore programme needs to accommodate these perspectives to accommodate these emerging trends.

Theoretical Framework

There is a general awareness among nations that globalisation has not produced sustainable development and in some nations produced anti-development and increasing inequality between nations (Gacel-Avila, 2005). This may be due to an excessive focus on economic and trade performance parameters and lack of attention to the social values and human potential development. This realisation has resulted in ethical and political demands and led to the United Nations Declaration on Higher education for the 21st century that exhorts higher education to facilitate the development of a world that fosters equity, tolerance and responsible communities. This declaration by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) recognises the power of higher education to transform individuals and communities. The demand for contribution to society is now added to the traditionally acknowledged roles of providing education and conducting research. (IFIC, 2004). These forces are thrusting offshore higher education programmes to develop quality assurance processes that migrate from current “fit for purpose” perspectives to a transformative process that develop graduates capable of making a meaningful contribution



to wider society, local communities and to the economy. (Gibbs, 2010). New modes of service delivery and assessment must be assimilated in the conceptualisation of quality to accommodate these changes in stakeholder's expectations. The society needs in higher education, such as access, equity and participation have to be incorporated while planning quality development of the PHEIs providing offshore programmes (Prakash, 2018).

Review of literature in higher education indicates that most of the studies are aimed at practitioners rather than academic scholars (Healey, 2013; Kehm and Teichler, 2007; Teichler, 2005). Thus, an a-theoretical approach rules higher education research (Tight, 2004), which has been dubbed as 'a-theoretical community of practice'. Also, most of the research articles are published by non-academic international organisations, which are informally designated as 'grey literature' (Healey, 2013). Against this background, locating a theory that could accommodate and explain the various factors affecting quality in the offshore programmes and simultaneously encompass the ethical and social justice demands of stakeholders related to social, economic and cultural expectations was found to be difficult.

Gap Analysis Theory

Gap Analysis theory (Langford, Raymond, Ret, Huynh, & Lewis, 2008) was used for this study to explore the variation between the expected and perceived role of IUP in assuring the quality of the offshore programme by different stakeholders. Insight from the literature review showed that offshore programme by a private institution is affected by globalisation forces, localisation demands and profit expectations. The literature review highlighted the various factors and processes that impact the quality of offshore programmes. Understanding the expectations and perceptions of stakeholders on these factors using the Gap Analysis approach enables measurement of the quality performance in an offshore programme and identify areas for improvement (Faganel, 2010). In a Gap Analysis approach, service quality



is determined by the gap between expected and perceived level of performance (Brandon-Jones & Silvestro, 2010). Gap Analysis approach normally refers to the space between "*where we are*" i.e., the present status, and "*where we want to be*" i.e., the future status (Rouse, 2014). This analysis helps to identify the areas of lapses and improvements expected by various stakeholders. The data collected from study participants were analysed to identify the differences between stakeholders' perspectives on offshore programme quality and student learning. It was also used to understand the shortcomings perceived by the stakeholders regarding PHEI performance related to quality assurance and adherence to affiliation terms. Gap Analysis was also conducted to identify the differences between the perceived role on the contribution of the IUPs in assuring the quality of teaching and the expected role which seen to be vital to improve the current status quo. The disparity between these two variables (the perception and expectations) was used to identify areas having variation between the existing state and the preferred or ideal condition (Fater, 2013) and suggest improvements.

Gap Analysis approach has been used in the educational field to examine issues related to quality management, service quality, teaching and learning, curriculum development (Jackson, Helms, & Ahmadi, 2011). This approach has been used to improve the quality of postgraduate programmes (Lampley, 2001), improve teaching and learning (Narasimhan, 1997) and examine the correlation between services quality dimensions and customer satisfaction and behavioural intention in higher education (Ham & Hayduk, 2003).

Gap Analysis offers a disciplined methodological approach to assess the quality of services in higher education (DiDomenico & Bonnici, 1996). Gap Analysis can also be used to explore different gaps in relation to "skills", "business profit", "needs", "expectations" "perceptions". In this study, Gap Analysis was guided by the quality parameters as per the Parasuraman and Berry model (Chui, Ahmad, Bassim, & Zaimi, 2016). These related to



physical infrastructure and facilities, the responsiveness of the management and faculty, reliability of the teaching process, student support and engagement, assuring performance. Any gap in the perceptions and expectation in these areas were viewed as a lack of understanding of stakeholder needs and significance. Gap Analysis was useful for identifying the areas for improvement in the quality assurance process in offshore programmes that enable better implementation in the future. The difference between expectations and perceived performance by stakeholders provide diagnostic value (Ham & Hayduk, 2003). Low perception of performance reveals a problem area that needs to be attended (Brandon-Jones & Silvestro, 2010). The relative importance given to various factors by stakeholders can be assessed from the strength of their expectations. These relative strengths of expectations enable to envision a future quality of the offshore programme that is desired by stakeholders (Langford et al., 2008). Thus, Gap Analysis provided information on factors considered important by various stakeholders for improving quality in offshore programmes and meet the broader needs of society. However, Gap Analysis does not enable an understanding of the root causes of this variation or its complexity. It also does not help to explore and explain the underlying factors and impetus that result in the perception gaps of the stakeholders.

Insights from existing literature, especially Social Inclusion theory (Gidley, 2010), was used in conjunction with Gap Analysis method to explain the variation between expectations and perceptions held by stakeholders about the role of IUP in assuring the quality of the offshore programme. Social Inclusion theory of higher education quality liberates the notion of education quality from the anchoring of neoliberal ideology and uplift it by encompassing the collaborative and normative ideologies based on social justice and human potential (Commons & Richards, 2002). This perspective aligns with the values in



“The Philosophy of Education” (The Education Council, 2017) set by the Omani government. Social Inclusion theory and its supporting constructs are explained henceforth.

Social Inclusion Theory

Social Inclusion is a term used in academic and policy literature with diverse meaning. Social Inclusion as used in this study envisages providing equal opportunities to engage in education for developing the human potential of students and creating a prosperous and cohesive society (Gidley, 2010). Social Inclusion as a phenomenon can be understood and assessed based on the concept of degree of inclusion. The constricted view of Social Inclusion is based on the neoliberal concepts for global competitiveness with access as the inclusion criteria. A broader reading based on social justice considers participation or engagement as Social Inclusion. The broadest interpretation through the lens of human potential considers success through empowerment as Social Inclusion. These dimensions of Social Inclusion theory enable an integrated understanding of the potentials of quality achievement in higher education. Social Inclusion theory of higher education quality liberates the notion of education quality from the anchoring of neoliberal ideology and uplift it by encompassing the collaborative and normative ideologies based on social justice and human potential (Gidley, 2010). This broad interpretation of Social Inclusion based on degrees of Social Inclusion and spectrum of ideologies enables assessment of the quality of education in higher education from the perspective of all involved stakeholders. The constructs of the degree of Social Inclusion can be understood as a scheme involving degrees of inclusion, i.e., access, participation or engagement and success through empowerment. These dimensions are discussed henceforth.

Access

This dimension of Social Inclusion in higher education is based on neoliberal



ideologies and aims to alleviate the skill shortages of the nation for achieving economic growth. So, the access perspective serves a nationalist agenda for building the national economy and becoming competitive in the global market. Neoliberalism values economic growth enabled through borderless trade, free markets, freedom of choice and reduced government role (Steger, 2005). This access dimension measures inclusion in terms of number and percentages of students undergoing higher education as it is seen to be important to increase skilled labour and improving the economy (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000). The access viewpoint does not give any consideration or importance to the participation and success of students or the quality of education imparted. The values promoted by this system will not enable students to overcome their social and economic disadvantages to access higher education (Giroux, 2003). This situation arises because access to higher education is based on competition and does not provide consideration for social and power inequalities faced by students (Bexley, Marginson and Wheelahan, 2007). Higher education based on neoliberal ideologies produce homogeneously educated students, as economic factors are given importance while designing the curriculum. This reductionist approach, therefore, excludes integrating the sensitivities of local culture and social structure into higher education. The pursuit of the narrow approach of access for inclusion in higher education can easily concentrate higher education in the hands of a small number of elite universities that have upper hand in funding and research. This results in benefitting a small number of people at the expense of others, leading to knowledge capitalism (Burton-Jones, 2003).

Participation or engagement

A participation or engagement perspective envisages Social Inclusion by providing equal opportunity, dignity, and impartiality for all. This approach is based on social justice ideology and strives to provide equal opportunity to participate in social opportunities and



uphold human dignity. Critical pedagogy theories in education are grounded in social justice principles (Giroux, 2003). In education, participation is achieved via partnerships between the community and higher educational institutions. The motivations for these partnerships can be social justice concerns or community development. Another motivation for partnership is building research capacity, which can take the form of partnership with industry. The social justice perspective strongly advocates sustainability as the prime motivation for the partnership of higher education institutes with the community rather than economic considerations (Langworthy, 2008). Partnership with community enables the student to obtain real-world experience. Literature terms this type of learning *as academic service-learning, authentic learning, experiential education, constructivist teaching* (Thompson, 2008, p.6). For these partnerships to be effective, the nature of the relationship needs to move from being reactive to responsive and intentional. The higher educational institutes following the participatory perspective suffer from the criticism of developing an organisation that is not globally competitive. However, the integration of social justice considerations allows incorporation of concerns and interest of all higher education stakeholders regardless of their power. This allows development and assessment of complex quality dimensions in the higher education institutes.

Success through empowerment

This perspective of Social Inclusion envisages achievement of the maximum potential of a human being through empowerment. This degree of Social Inclusion is based on human potential ideology and aims for the cultural transformation of society. The philosophy of Social Inclusion through empowerment recognises the complexity of human beings and the notion that education is transformative (Olsson, 2008). There is also an ethical dimension to the approach, as it recognises that human beings are multidimensional and have interests beyond their political and economic roles. Student success through empowerment may be



achieved by rekindling hope and encouraging them to develop strategies to achieve their life goals (Bassett, 2005). Such progress is required to shield the youth population from the culture of hopelessness churned out by social media. This approach derives support from critical and transformative pedagogies that focus on higher human reasoning and positive development (Commons & Richards, 2002). Strategy for enabling the empowerment of students would require higher education institutions to focus on positive future visioning and lifelong learning (Giroux, 2003). This framework does not require students to conform to an ideal profile to fit into the community. The individual diversity is accepted and the richness it brings in terms of gender, age, ability, and culture is valued. In a system with neoliberal underpinnings, there is pressure to conform to western world model or factory model of human development (Gidley, 2010).

The initiatives by Oman government has increased the access and participation in higher education by increasing the number of educational institutions, providing scholarships, establishing regulations ensuring equal opportunity and providing mentoring to students. The next stage is to increase the participation aspect and initiate approaches to empower students to be an active part in their society. Study data will be evaluated to understand the scope of improving participation and enhancing empowerment based on the framework of the Social Inclusion theory. The data from this study will be examined to understand how curriculum design can incorporate approaches to enable students to frame their future positively with optimism and action-oriented behaviour (Eckersley, et al., 2007). The data will be also assessed to understand how higher education institutions meet the national objectives to equip students with the ability to plan and deliver services that meet community expectations (Reid, 2008) and enable students to know their cultural values (Gidley, 2010). Currently the local quality system measure the outcomes of different programmes to meet the job market expectations in term of technical skills, however; the current system does not ensure that the



higher education system exceeds this traditional view to empower students with an overall learning experience that help in preserving their social values and culture which are vital to a country like Oman. Participation is the highest degree of Social Inclusion theory that indicates a balanced education system which equips students with the required learning skills needed to enable them to become fit for jobs as well as become loyal to their community. Oman is in need for this balance as expatriates currently represent more than 60 % of the working force and this by itself impact the social identity of the Omani culture (NSA, 2017).

Chapter Conclusion

This Chapter has provided information on the nature, importance and the contents of offshore programmes generally offered by PHEIs in Oman. The literature review revealed that most studies focused on the Branch campus model than Validation and Franchise models of affiliation in offshore programmes. This may be due to the popularity of branch models. Studies on stakeholder perceptions are mostly focused on the student, maybe due to the predominance of quality assessment based on student outcomes and satisfaction. Studies involving perception or experiences of management and faculty is relatively rare. Literature review revealed the need for a taxonomy of terms that are accepted globally, as various terms with different underlying concepts and specific meaning are used synonymously and generically. The literature revealed the trend for migration of quality assurance systems from mechanistic systems to stakeholder-centric models. Also, definitions of quality are slowly moving from fit for purpose to student transformation paradigm. A study framework based on Gap Analysis enabled study design and evaluation of study findings based on Social Inclusion theory to extend the knowledge on research questions. Gap Analysis and Social



Inclusion theory enabled the assessment of the quality of education in higher education offshore programmes from the perspective of all involved stakeholders.

Interpretation of the study findings based on these theoretical frameworks allowed incorporation of the emerging concepts in higher education that transform students and society. The next chapter presents the research methodology of this study.



Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This Chapter explains the methodology and research methods selected for the study. Starting with the philosophical underpinnings and its alignment with the research aims, this Chapter outlines the process of inquiry and the action plan adopted for understanding the phenomena studied. Steps taken to ensure the quality of the study are detailed next. Data collection section focuses on justifying the research methods (interviews, questionnaires, and focused group) used for the study and how the data analysis was carried out. The research ethics consideration and challenges in the research process are also covered in this Chapter.

Interpretivism

This study aims to explore the perceptions of Omani key stakeholders on the role and influence of IUPs in ensuring the quality of teaching in PHEIs in Oman. The Omani stakeholders include PHEIs managers, academic faculty, students and MoHE senior staff. This research uses interpretivism approach because knowledge of a phenomenon is created from the subjective experience of the social actors (Hatch, 2002). Interpretivism approach is a paradigm based on the assumption that there is no single reality and reality is only possible with the assistance of social constructions that take into consideration different human factors (Wiek & Lang, 2016). An interpretivism approach is used because it allows reality to be accessed through social constructions such as shared languages and meanings (Myres, 2008). In this study, interpretivism is ideal as the data collected provide explanatory and personal views on the role and influence of Omani stakeholders on IUPs in ensuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes in PHEIs. Most of the variables observed in higher



education studies are related to personal beliefs like values, perceptions, intentions rather than objective facts (Reale, 2014). The selected stakeholder participants are familiar with the roles of PHEIs engaged with international universities, the nature of offshore programmes, and teaching quality elements. This background allowed them to provide "inside" knowledge of the studied phenomenon (Flick, 2009).

Research Methodology

Mixed methods were used in this study to enable me as a researcher to explore the views and experiences of key participants, including management, students, faculty of PHEIs and senior staff from MoHE. A qualitative approach was used to obtain data from the senior staff of MoHE, managers, and students of PHEI, whereas quantitative approach was used to measure perceptions of the academic faculty related to the same subject matter. The selection of these approaches was influenced by the aims of the study, my role as a senior director in the MoHE, the participants' numbers, and the level of accessibility of each group of participants. The data collection using both approaches was carried out concurrently, and the sequence of using methods has no impact on this study. Also, concurrent data collection has helped in obtaining the relevant data in a shorter time and gave me enough time for checking data accuracy and reliability. The data mixing in this study was done by integrating the qualitative and quantitative data and was used for interpreting the study findings and for developing a generalised understanding of the research questions. This mixing was achieved by connecting and integrating data collected from different participants (Creswell, 2009).

Quantitative methodology is adopted for this study due to its suitability and feasibility to the concerned faculty and me as a researcher. This approach facilitates wider access to data and increases the possibility of obtaining more responses from the selected participants (Wells, Kolek, Williams, & Saunders, 2015). Also, this approach helps to reduce



the influence of the power relationship between the participants and me which might impact the quality of collected data and respondents' biasedness (Brooks and Normore, 2015). This approach was adopted using an online questionnaire which gives the potential participants the advantage of anonymity. Anonymity allows for more openness and freedom in data provision with less tension to the participants to be quoted for their responses and minimise the risk of being recognised by their superiors. Other advantages gained by using this approach are the ease of reaching a large number of people with minimum cost and efforts. Also, this approach is time-efficient as it reduces the time required for data collection, analysis and comparison among respondents with high flexibility in choosing the time and venue for data collection (Walker, Steinfort & Maqsood, 2014). This approach allowed me to arrive at generalisations that are valid for the population studied. The quantitative approach also reduces the bias in the data due to the standardisation of responses designed in the process (Stenius, et al., 2017). Therefore, and due to the mentioned reasons, this approach was considered among other approaches to collect data from faculty.

On the other hand, a qualitative methodology was adopted as it allows me to understand and explore participants' views and experiences about different matters related to my topic. This enables me to develop insights and construct meaningful knowledge that enriches and deepen my understanding of the studied phenomenon (Theoharis, 2009).

A qualitative approach also enables identification and closer observation of participant feelings and sensitivities about the areas under investigation (Yin, 2011). In this study qualitative methodology was used to explore and understand the views, experiences; and expectations of different stakeholders' groups on the quality offshore programmes in PHEIs. This approach involves producing data enriched with details that help in building a rich picture of participant insights and reflections about a phenomenon (Atkinson, 2017). It also provides the researcher with the freedom to encourage participants to elaborate on their



responses, leading to new insights and topic areas not considered initially (Doz, 2011).

Although this approach might be a time consuming and required more planning and preparation prior and during implementation than quantitative approach, however; using this approach allows for more creativity in data presentation and interpretation. Also, this approach allows me to interact face to face with the concerned individuals; this helps me to create a more authentic understanding of their beliefs and values. A quantitative approach leaves out common meanings held by participants about a social phenomenon. This approach may not help in explaining how social reality is formed and maintained, as it measures the static state of the phenomenon (Rahman, 2016). Participant responses will be assessed using relevant insights from literature to overcome this limitation.

Participant Selection

The literature review (Chapter 2) revealed the stakeholders, directly and indirectly, involved in offshore programmes. These stakeholders are government officials, higher education management, faculty, staff, students, parents, and community. Stakeholders who were directly involved in offshore higher education programmes were considered for this study. This criterion limited the participants of this study into four stakeholder categories: government officials of MoHE, top management, faculty, and students of PHEI.

Officials from MoHE were chosen for this study because they represent the main regulatory body of higher education (HE) and are the policymakers of all aspects related to affiliation and approval of offshore programmes in PHEIs. These officials have key decision-making roles related to the selection and monitoring of the affiliation implementation in PHEIs.

The top management team (Deans and head of departments) of PHEI is responsible for implementing and supervising different academic affiliation agreements and monitoring the delivery of offshore programmes in their institutions. Insight into their experience and



perceptions are crucial for understanding the challenges in maintaining teaching quality. The participants in this category were selected based on their organisational leadership position and their ability to influence their institutions (Harvey, 2010).

Academic staff was selected as they represent the teaching professionals directly involved in the delivery of the programme and crucially responsible for the quality of direct teaching and learning practices. The challenges and problems faced by them are crucial to understanding the impediments of achieving benchmarked teaching quality. The students are the direct recipients of the teaching practices, so they are in a good position to share their views and experiences of whether the teaching quality meets their expectations. This wide range of participation of multiple groups increases the confidence and reliability of data collected and support findings with multiple pieces of evidence. (Merriam, 2009).

There are 28 PHEIs in Oman that offers a wide range of higher education programmes through different affiliation models and partnership agreements with international universities. Based on these variations and to increase participants homogeneity and findings comparability, a number of criteria were used to select the targeted institutions for investigation, these were:

- i. **Location:** Should be located in Muscat, the capital of Oman which has the highest population density in the country and the highest student population.
- ii. **Accessibility:** Within driving distance from the researcher geographical area.
- iii. **Affiliation type:** Should implement offshore programmes through one of the affiliation models described in Chapter 2, these are: Franchised, Validation; and Branch Campus.
- iv. **Education system uniformity:** Following similar educational systems – the United Kingdom system (Note: although the main campus of the Branch selected for this



study is located in one of the GCC countries; however; all programmes in the main campus are validated by a university in the UK)

- v. **Seniority:** At least five (5) years old in the same educational system – to ensure that the top management and faculty members are well conversant with the affiliation's processes, policies, and terms of operation.
- vi. **Awarding body:** The final certification of the qualification should be conferred solely from their affiliate partner, as this helps in providing comparable data on the level of commitments and obligations of IUP across different models

Of the selected institutions, postgraduate programmes were selected for study, due to the following considerations:

- i. There is limited enrollment in postgraduate programmes. This availed more opportunities for me to have a closer look at the study topic.
- ii. Limited studies on postgraduate students in Oman due to recent developments of these programmes and as the first postgraduate programme was licensed in 2005.
- iii. The maturity level of postgraduate students. Most of the postgraduate students in Oman are also working employees. Maturity in age along with working experience help to enrich this study with advanced views from the respondents. Mature respondents are well acquainted with the terminologies associated with their programmes, reflective, and open-minded. This, in turn, enhances the reliability of the feedback gathered from students' group.

Accordingly, three Omani PHEIs with different affiliation models were selected. Based on these institutions request and to maintain the highest level of confidentiality, the name of the selected PHEIs is not disclosed. Therefore, these institutions are identified according to the affiliation model, i.e., Franchised, Validation and Branch Campus.

The selection of postgraduate programmes then narrowed down to include Masters programmes in Business and management disciplines to increase homogeneity. Homogeneity improves the effectiveness of the focus group method used for collecting data from students (Morgan, 1997).

Business and IT studies are the top postgraduate qualifications offered in Oman in terms of student numbers and students' preferences (HEAC statistics, 2016). Business studies such as MBA and other pathways are attracting most postgraduate students due to its relevance to the Omani job market. According to HEAC statistical data in 2016, 60% of students enrolled in postgraduate programmes are enrolled in business studies. For this reason, I decided to select students and faculty members from business programmes.

Research methods

Interviews, focus groups, and questionnaire were used as the primary methods for data collection. Face to face interviews and focus groups yielded qualitative data while the questionnaire produced quantitative data. The interview method was used to gather data from MoHE officials and management of PHEI. Focus group was used to collect data from students, while the questionnaire was used for measuring perceptions of PHEI faculty about the quality of education.

Semi-structured interviews were used as they enable the researcher to see the subject studied from the perspective of the interviewees and the underlying reasoning for that perspective (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Semi-structured interviews also produce enlightening information by allowing participants to express their opinions and insights (Smith and Osborn, 2008) through open-ended discussion (Yin, 2011). Three Directors from MoHE who are directly involved in processing and monitoring affiliation agreements were chosen for the interviews. Senior managers consisting of one Dean and one Head of Department (HOD) from the three selected PHEIs were chosen for interviews representing



the top management of selected PHEIs. Six interviews were conducted with the top management of the PHEI, and three interviews were conducted for MoHE officials. Semi-structured interviews allow freedom in the questioning sequence and what areas require follow-up for each interviewee (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). This flexibility enabled the participants to express their own experiences and perceptions. Interviews, however, may be prone to error due to deliberate errors or misrepresentation by the participants (Tourangeau, Kreuter and Eckman, 2012). This may be done to avoid revealing sensitive information or fear of repercussions (Kreuter, McCulloch, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2011). Participants may provide answers that discourage further questioning based on their motivation to engage in the interview. Participants find this behaviour easier than outrightly rejecting participation initially (Tourangeau, Kreuter, & Eckman, 2012). These insights from literature enabled me to understand participant responses and detect a reluctance to participate. Face to face interviews helps analyse non-verbal data from the participant such as their facial expressions, voice tone, body language. I used these non-verbal data to add extra information to the verbal responses provided by the participants in response to a question and ascertain their veracity (Opdenakker, 2006).

Focus groups were formed and conducted with students to understand their perceptions about status and issues related to the quality of offshore programmes. Focus groups enable the researcher to elicit the perspectives of the participants (Perelli-Harris, et al., 2014). The collective discussion in the focus group in a non-threatening and permissive environment allow the surfacing of unspoken assumptions on the area of interest. The critical interactions in the focus group have the potential to create a dynamism that is absent in individual interviews (Morgan, 1996).

Focus groups enable the researcher to understand the context-specific explanations given by the participants. This aspect is useful as the focus groups belonged to different



affiliation model in the selected PHEIs. A small group size allows participants time to express their views, experiences and hence increase interaction and effective discussion among participation (Morgan, 1996). However, accurately summarising these conversations to highlight the main points of the discussion may be a challenge (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992). Responses of participants may not always reflect their true feelings due to the group dynamics in this technique (George, 2013). The effective size of a focus group is 6-12 participants per group (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook, 2007; Morgan, 1997). Two to five groups are typically formed in a study as a rule of thumb (Carlsen and Glenton, 2011). Based on this understanding from literature, a total of six focus groups with two focus groups in each of the three PHEIs was formed for this study (see Participant Selection section). Seven students were planned in each focus group, and hence 14 students from each PHEI was needed. This consideration put the total planned students in the focus group from three institutions as 42. I managed to enrol a total of 41 students in the focus groups.

Purposively selecting samples from limited sources in a focus group may invoke a bias in the interpretation of data for generalisation (Morgan, 1997). I minimised these biases by developing a systematic and verifiable procedure for data analysis that established a trail of evidence as noted by (Rabiee, 2004). This approach allows verification of study findings by another researcher and as a result increase the reliability of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, this selection increases self-disclosure between participants (Jarrett, 1993) and supports structuring the discussions based on the research agenda (Morgan, 1997). Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used in the focus groups to elicit participants' perspectives on issues related to their learning experience, teaching quality measures, the importance, and values of offshore programmes. Open-ended questions helped me to derive in-depth information, not restricted to any pre-determined format and thereby gain a diverse



perspective by exploring themes. These discussions were however limited to the topics that participants were comfortable to discuss with the group. Privacy concerns limit the effectiveness of focus groups as people may not be comfortable to discuss and disclose information with unfamiliar people (Morgan, 1997).

Factors relating to gender, age, social status, nationality can influence the quality of participation in a focus group. These factors can disrupt the flow of discussion as participants may perceive the need to accommodate group members considered outsiders (Morgan, 1989). The effectiveness of a focus group is impacted when participants are having different social roles related to authority and status (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Semi-structured questions, on the other hand, ensured the discussion did not deviate substantially from the main issue and provided me clarity for using interventions, if and when required (McAlinden, Pesudovs, & Moore, 2010). Due to the complexity of handling group dialogue due to interruptions and interventions of different group members during the discussion, hence recording these discussions is important. However; recording discussions may contain emotional exchanges that might be missed if not retrieved and noted carefully and instantly (Morgan, 1997).

A questionnaire survey was conducted to gain further understanding of how the academic faculty perceives teaching quality (De Vaus, 2002). The questionnaire allowed privacy and anonymity for the faculty to provide honest feedback (Vogl, 2013). Since the selected institutions are relatively small in term of student size in postgraduate programmes, the academic faculty size also limited. I sent an invitation of participation to all academic faculty working in the selected institutions who were teaching in Business postgraduates programmes. A total of 34 academic faculty were invited who represents 100% of the total academic faculty population; however, a total of 24 responses were received out of the selected population which represents approximately 71% of the total population.



It is important to note that the total responses received by the three institutions were varied as five responses received from the branch campus institution, eight responses from the franchised institution, and eleven from the validated institution. The variation in the responses is attributed to the size of the local faculty teaching in postgraduate programmes in each institution and the number of students enrolled as well.

The questionnaire was conducted online using the Survey Monkey software. This approach allowed the data to be collected economically and expeditiously without compromising on the quality of data. Questionnaires allow many participants to be approached easily and with low cost (Jones, Baxter, Khanduja, 2013).

Online surveys allow respondents to take their time to respond to the questions and ensures privacy. This method allows participants to respond truthfully and conscientiously that genuinely reflect their perceptions (Alderman and Salem, 2010). However, an online survey does not allow capturing of non-verbal reactions as the respondent and context remain hidden (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna and Chapman 2004). Also, the researcher cannot use visual and nonverbal aids to convey enthusiasm, to motivate participant for responding and sustain concentration (Gillham 2005; Shuy 2003). Non-response to a question can be difficult to control (Jackle et al., 2006); therefore; the online survey of this study was designed in a systematic way where all questions made available in a certain numerical order and respondents were required to answer them all, i.e. the respondent has no option to quit or skip any question. However; participants had the option to stop filling in the questionnaire at any point in time and could exit the questionnaire home page if they decided not to continue their participation. In such cases, the system categorises the skipped participation as 'incomplete response' and it is given the value of '0'. The researcher did not encounter such case while analysing the data.



The structured questionnaire had questions related to the critical elements for the quality of offshore programmes and problems associated with teaching in these programmes. These questions were designed to generate data on the role played by IUP in managing the quality of teaching in offshore programmes and expose the challenges and benefits. The questionnaire was tested prior to distribution when three professionals in the academic field were invited to review and comment on the quality and clarity of the questionnaire to ensure its validity (See Appendix 6: Sample-4).

Validity and Reliability of the Study

Validity

The validity of a study establishes its credibility and transferability (Guba, 1981). The purpose is to ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings. There are three primary purposes of testing the validity of a study; i.e., to establish the correctness of the research measures, to identify the accuracy of the data, and to assess the extent to which these findings can be generalised (Rayan and Bernard, 2000). The latter two purposes are referred to as internal and external validity respectively. For this study, it was essential to ensure that the research instruments were credible enough to answer the complex set of elements present in the study aims and objectives. The multi-stage process of creating the background literature, followed by interviews and focus group study helped to delve deeper into the critical issues surrounding the topic, i.e., quality of education in PHEIs in Oman while exploring the identified variables appropriately. The validity of the qualitative approach in this study was ensured by relying on multiple perceptions and probing for deeper understanding of socially constructed knowledge through first-person enquiry and reflection (Golafshani, 2003). In the quantitative approach of this study, the formation of the interview questions helped to



gather data that are relevant to the research questions and thus ensure the validity of the study (Madu, 1998).

The diverse background of the interviewees and focus groups posed a challenge to me. The heterogeneity in the motivations, knowledge levels and English skills of the participants made the interview questions design difficult. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions enabled me to provide participants with the freedom to express their opinions, but capture data aligned to the research aims (Brooks & Normore, 2015). I was sensitive to the influence of context in participant responses, which enabled me to avoid unwarranted generalisations (Robinson, 2014). The interview questions aimed to capture maximum information from the participants regarding the study aims. I expected the responses to vary widely across participants and in some aspects anticipated responses that contradicted other stakeholders. I carefully constructed the questions to bring out these contradictions. The English language capability of students was another barrier to the research process. The interviews focus groups and questionnaires were conducted in English and all set of questions were piloted and tested prior actual data collection. Since most of the students were Omani nationals, the interview questions were made available in Arabic for ease of understanding, and to avoid misinterpretation or gap in communication. The Arabic version of focus group questions and other documentation (PIS and consent sheet), all made available to students in due course. The translation was conducted by a professional translation agent and I was keen to ensure that the Arabic version was accurate and did not miss the important aspects of the original English version.

It is vital to ensure that questions are clearly and correctly understood by the participants to receive valid responses (Oppenheim, 1992). Explaining the study in Arabic for students before starting the interviews also helped to break the ice with the participants.



As far as external validity is concerned, measures were taken to maximise it. For this reason, I ensured that the participants represented the target population, i.e., faculty, deans, officials, and students. Care was taken to ensure inclusion, for example, of faculty members belonging to diverse cultural, educational and industry backgrounds or students from various income groups and family backgrounds. At least one student representing a different culture with education background outside Oman was considered in each focus group. This inclusion brought participants with diverse attitudes to the focus group, which is required for a productive discussion (Morgan, 1997). Strangeness in participants in some cases can foster the surfacing of assumptions which a researcher is trying to investigate (Agar and MacDonald, 1995). Familiar participants may not discuss issues that they unconsciously recognise as uncomfortable to the group. Furthermore, questions were framed by paying close attention to the variation in the sample characteristics to gather a rich pool of information on the research topic. It may be noted that student focus groups varied based on the type of affiliation model. This variation did not affect the consistency of the set questions; however, I had to ask some interview questions differently to ensure that each group comprehends the question according to their context.

Customising the research questions enables the validity of data that is representative of the population. Based on the observation by Thatcher (2010), the validity of the data collection tools was tested through a pilot study. A sample of 10 individuals was selected from the target population after informed consent but before the actual data collection period to test the questions used in the focus group. A few concerns on clarity and understandability of the questions were raised. Based on this feedback, a few changes were made to the interview questions, and the number of questions was reduced from 12 to 10. The language of the questions was edited based on the feedback to make them more precise and concise to avoid ambiguity. These concerns were addressed before the start of actual data collection. I



utilised several strategies to ensure that the data gathered reflect the perceptions of the participants. This precaution enhanced the validity and reliability of the study conclusions.

The research instruments for the qualitative data collection included interview guides and field notebooks for interview transcriptions completed by me. Following the discussion on the research instrument design, content validity was maintained using appropriate interview and survey questions. All questions related to the interviews, questionnaire and focus group were accurately formulated in line with the overall research questions. Each question was evaluated against the research objectives to ensure they are aligned with the topic under investigation. The data collected based on these questions using different methods enabled me to develop themes related to the research questions through data analysis.

Reliability

Reliability construct addresses the issue of dependability of the study (Guba, 1981). Dependability denotes that study findings are consistent and dependable, which is essential to establish the trustworthiness of the study. This information enables a future researcher to establish the boundary conditions of the study and repeat the research process. Description of the research process also allows future researchers to evaluate the coherence of the research method used. These utilities of describing the inquiry method enhance the dependability of the study (Hays, Wood, Dahl and Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). From a qualitative research perspective, reliability measures the stability, consistency, and repeatability of the study findings (Creswell, 2014). The definition of codes was checked continuously for consistency during the data coding process to ensure reliability. The interview transcripts were checked for obvious mistakes and errors. The consistency of the data collection instruments is directly related to dependability (Twycross & Shield, 2004). Peer review was used to identify and clarify issues in the research process and study findings. Peers were research scholars, my



colleagues and practitioners in higher education in Oman. These audits helped to increase the dependability of the study.

Data Collection

Participants

There were three participants from MoHE including one male and two females. These participants had the designations of Director and Advisor. These participants had an average experience of 21 years in higher education, with the minimum being 18 years. The participants had an average of eight years of experience in dealing with the affiliation of offshore programmes. The top management of PHEI consisted of six participants, i.e., three HoDs and three Deans. Of these participants, there was one female Dean and one female HoD. The participants' total experience was in the range of 18-25 years and the experience of leading in offshore programme varied from 6-12 years.

A total of 41 students participated in this study, 31 students out of them (75%) were enrolled in the MBA programme and 10 in other Business studies such as MSc in Management and MSc in Human Resource Management. Out of total participants, 30 students were in the second year of their programme, while 11 of the respondents were in the first year of the programme. In term of gender, 26 of the participants were male, and 15 were female. No filtering in terms of gender or the year of study was applied. (See overall demographics of the participants in appendix 9).

All faculty members, i.e., the 24 respondents were full-time lecturers. This characteristic is attributed to the fact that Omani Labour Law does not allow expatriates to work as part-time teachers. Since the majority of faculty working in Business postgraduate programmes in the selected institutions were not locals, this explains why all respondents are



full-time academic faculty. 41.% of the academic faculty had 15-20 years of teaching experience, 29% of faculty had 10-15 years, 12% had more than 20 years of experience, and only 4% had less than five years. The maturity and the extensive experience of the faculty helped in getting more in-depth views related to my research.

Data Collection Process

Before starting data collection, I sought an approval letter from the highest authorities in MoHE to conduct this research and to visit PHEIs premises for data collection (see Appendix 1). Upon receipt of this approval, initial communication was established via phone calls followed by emails with the top management team of the selected PHEIs to gain their approval for me to collect data. Then I prepared all the required documentation to gain the university research ethics approval. It took me four months to receive the formal approval from UoL (see Appendix 2), and then I started sending invitations to the three selected PHEIs to start conducting the interviews and distributing questionnaires. The research ethics of this study is detailed subsequently in this Chapter.

Interviews with top management of PHEI

I coordinated with each focal person at the selected institution to agree on the scheduled dates and venues for meeting with both the deans (and vice-chancellor in one case) and head of postgraduate studies. The Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and the consent sheet (see Appendix 3 & 4) were handed to the participants two weeks before the actual date of the interviews via the assigned coordinator. I conducted all face to face interviews myself in the participants' offices. All deans were helpful and enthusiastic about the research topic. All the interviews followed the same pattern of execution:



- As a researcher, I assured that all participants have read and understood the PIS that clarifies the purpose of the study and other ethical considerations associated with this research.
- I ensured that the consent sheet was signed by each participant before starting the interview.
- The interview started by introducing myself to the interviewees. Interviewees were encouraged to brief me on their background so that both parties become comfortable before the interview starts. In addition to that, I asked each participant if they had any questions or clarifications before starting.
- The consent of each participant was obtained by me to record the interview for retrieval and transcription of the data.
- The interviews concluded smoothly, within the planned duration of 40-60 minutes and ended with me thanking all participants for their time for taking part in this study.

Interviews with MoHE officials

Since MoHE is my workplace, accessing the MoHE participants for conducting interviews was relatively easy. However; choosing the right participants were a bit challenging as I had to select staff who have no direct relationship with me at the time of conducting the interviews. Four senior staff working in MoHE were selected at the beginning of the study based on the following criteria:

- The participants have no direct work relationship with me at the time of data collection. Therefore, my supervisors and direct subordinates were excluded from taking part in this study.



- The participants have a good understanding of academic affiliation and relevant practice in Omani PHEIs.
- The participants are involved with the process of affiliation.

By the time of the planned interviews, only three MoHE officials participated in the study as one of the selected and consented officials had resigned from the Ministry a few weeks before the scheduled interviews took place, hence he was excluded. Each participant was interviewed in his/her office upon their request. Their understandings of the different functionalities of affiliations present how the Ministry manages the process of affiliation and its different aspects. The interview lasted between 45- 60 minutes with each participant from MoHE.

Students focus groups

I used two different approaches to select students for the focus group. The first approach was to circulate the invitation of participation to all students in MBA or business studies in the three institutions through the help of the people who were the focal points for co-ordination in each institution. Before this circulation, I received the college/university approval to get access to all students' email address, and the invitation was sent out by the postgraduate coordinator. This approach worked well with two institutions, where I received good responses from the students who showed their willingness and confirmation to participate. Then I started to communicate with each student and got his/her permission to form a group and communicate via social media software called WhatsApp. This approach did not work well with one of the institutions as only two students confirmed their participation. I overcame this lack of interest in participation by using the student council. The invitation was routed through the office of the chair of the students' council. This strategy enabled me to get access to a more significant number of students pursuing an MBA



and business studies. I then received more responses from students for participation. All students who agreed to participate were met in their institutions upon their request. I conducted all focus groups in a meeting room assigned by each institution. Before meeting the students, I followed the ethical protocol by sending all participants the PIS two weeks prior to the interview date (see Appendix 3). Students consents were signed and handed it back to me at the same day of the interview (see Appendix 4) Each focus group interview lasted about one hour and a half.

Questionnaire with academic faculty

Since the questionnaire was designed electronically and distributed via Survey Monkey software, I sent the questionnaire web-link to each institution's management through the coordinator for approval. After the permission was granted, an invitation along with different documentation (PIS, MoHE letter and consent sheet) was sent to all academic faculty working in postgraduate programmes through the coordinator. I decided to invite all academic faculty since the number of faculty working in postgraduate was limited (between 8 and 12 faculty members are working in postgraduate departments in each institution). The responses were received by me directly through Survey Monkey application. Those who accepted to fill the questionnaire were reminded to send their consent sheet to the coordinator, who then handed it to me.

Data Analysis Process

I undertook a purposive reading of the collected data to identify similarity and differences of different participants' insights to enable theme generation and explore patterns (Richards, 2005). This task was done by recording my ideas and responses in memos while reading and rereading the data. The memos allowed me to explore the relationships between



the data that lead to new themes. Purposive reading resulted in the expansion of data by adding ideas data to the original data. Ideas data came from my reflexive memos that contained the areas that attracted my attention and reflection of why those topics were of interest. Topical and analytical coding (Richards, 2005) was undertaken by me on this expanded data to generate categories. I interrogated the data to find patterns due to frequency, resemblance, variance, causality and order (Saldana, 2009) and identify the emergence of outlines and categories. These categories were reflexively analysed by me to segregate and catalogue the concepts and themes emerging from this categorisation of data. Analysis of these themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) enabled me to identify meanings from data and categorise them to find trends in the data. The thematic analysis allowed me to move from data records to themes and ideas. The ideas generated from the data was reviewed inductively and synthesised with insights from existing knowledge and my experience to find answers to the research questions studied (Guest, MacQueen, Namey, 2012). This reflection and review enabled me to move from the details to the underlying concept and further progress to the abstract. This process enabled me to develop a theory that is local to the data (Richards, 2005) and provides a generalised explanation and understanding of the quality of higher education through offshore programmes in Oman.

To align the data analysis with the research questions, the data were grouped according to four main themes extracted from the research questions. The themes related to - a) elements vital to ensure quality in offshore programmes b) the role of foreign partners to ensure the quality of education c) extent to which foreign partners are fulfilling their roles d) change to key policies to improve offshore programme implementation. The data under these themes were further segregated under the stakeholder categories. The data segregated under each stakeholder section were then coded and categorised. Analysis of qualitative data allowed identification of sub-themes under each main theme for the three stakeholder



categories, i.e., officials of MoHE, top management and students of PHEI (See Appendix 7-Data Analysis Process).

For the quantitative data, the summary of results obtained from the questionnaire through survey monkey was first represented in excel sheet format and then processed using SPSS software to analyse the information with statistical evidence. SPSS statistical package was selected owing to its ability to import data from Excel as “.csv” files easily. The descriptive statistical data such as frequency counts of closed questions and distribution of multiple-choice questions responses were generated. Besides, the relationships between responses for different questions were explored, open-ended question responses collated, and graphical representations of the responses created. The SPSS programme is best suited for analyzing descriptive data and drawing patterns based on emergent themes in the study question responses (Greasley, 2007). Based on this, the quantitative data from academic faculty was segregated under each of the four main themes extracted from research questions and analysed for recognition of categories and sub-themes. The analysis allowed me to arrange the data under various levels that were aligned with the research questions. This ordering enabled me to structure the narrative of the study findings that could be readily correlated to the research questions. The sub-themes identified in the findings of the study were then reviewed and analysed to identify higher-level themes that transcended the stakeholder categorisation. This analysis allowed me to develop generalisations that extended the knowledge of the research questions.

Research Challenges

This study encountered a few challenges during the research process. Communication with the participants proved to be a challenge in the data collection process. This difficulty arose for getting the contact details and while initiating communication with different



participants. Approaching students and enlisting their participation was the most challenging. In the beginning, they were reluctant to participate in the study due to their busy schedules. This obstacle was overcome with the help of coordinators of the institution, social media, and intermediaries for channeling communication. One effective strategy was to invite students through students' council members (called students union in some western countries). Using this communication channel was effective in inducing the reluctant students to participate in this study. I had trouble to choose the venue and the right time to organise focus groups. This problem was due to conflicting class timing, different residences of students and varying preferences. I noted early that satisfying timing and location demands of every participant for group meetings were not possible. I resolved this by taking my own decision on a meeting location that the majority of students would accept. Another related problem was communicating the timing and location of the group interviews. This communication issue was resolved by using the social media platform of WhatsApp. The communication enabled by WhatsApp fostered easy, timely and instant communication between everyone. Obtaining MoHE participants for the study was also a problem as only four people could be selected for the study. One of the selected staff resigned from MoHE before the actual interview took place and this reduced the number of participants to three.

Few students expressed their discomfort with the recording of the interviews with a tape recorder due to lack of experience with face to face interviews. A trustworthy setting and comfortable ambience (Flick, 2009) is essential to achieve the best responses in interviews. I gave each student the option of conducting the discussion without recording. However, they changed their mind after getting reassurances that the recorded information will not be exposed to any third party other than myself and all information related to their identity will be anonymised. Some students chose to sign the consent without using their actual names and I respected their choice in order to minimise their anxiety. I was



overwhelmed by dealing with lots of data gathering methods such as interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. Each method has its protocols in data collections and different instruments. I had good experience of collecting data via questionnaire method but using focus groups and face to face interviews in such a formal and systematic way was new. This data collection required a vast amount of reading relevant research material on how to conduct them. However, practising these methods in real life differed vastly from theoretical knowledge. There was no proactive solution to this except to practice it through pilot interviews (Yin, 2011) with friends and colleagues where I got friendly advice on areas for improvement. This effort increased my proficiency as indicated by Majid et al. (2017).

Students' fluency in the English language was an issue during data collection as focus group discussions were conducted in English. Though the use of the English language enabled the involvement and contribution of all participants, it constrained deeper engagement of students with less fluency. I recorded the interviews and focus group interactions. These were later transcribed into electronic word processing software using a hired professional supported with disclosure agreement to ensure confidentiality of the exposed data. The transcripts by the professional were then verified by me to ensure accuracy.

The researcher's standing about the topic of study, participants, the context of the research and methodology determines the researcher position related to study (Holmes, 2014). One of the challenges faced in this study is my positionality as a researcher that might impact the level of accuracy and honesty of data collected. My perspectives are influenced by salient views formed from my prior knowledge and accumulative experience (Foote and Bartell, 2011). I have 19 years of experience in the higher education sector and having a senior leadership role in the MoHE. This role has provided me with extensive experience in managing various educational departments and formulation of various guidelines for the



higher education sector. I am actively involved in developing inputs that are crucial for the policy framework governing higher education in Oman. This exposure and experience have helped me to understand the existing problems and opportunities to ensure quality in higher education. However, my work profile created a power differential with the participants due to my senior position in MoHE. My identity as that of a government official responsible for supervising PHEI performance may have hindered honest communication by participants. I overcame the tension of power relationship through using several informal techniques such as using ice breakers, sense of humour, informal communication style, and humbleness with my interviewees during conversations and discussions. Also, my assurance of participants' anonymity and my obligations toward confidentiality of different data collected from them enhanced my position as a researcher and decreased my positionality effect.

Research Ethics

The first ethical concern this study has considered was about my responsibility to protect and inform the respondents. Throughout the study, the participants' confidentiality and freedom to participate were preserved (Mazur, 2007). Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of conducting the research. The principles of freedom and confidentiality were observed during participant selection, consent seeking and conducting the interviews. This process involved informing the participants of their rights, the purpose of the study, procedures to be undergone, and the benefits as well as risks involved. The study used Participation Information Sheet (PIS) to seek the participants' consent to take part in the study. Information sheets were used to assure the respondents that the current study does not involve any risks on their part. The consent forms were drafted in plain English to foster understanding by the respondents. This care was necessitated because there was variation in the English language fluency of the participants. The students from the Arabic medium were



not very fluent in the English language. The draft was fine-tuned to correct any misspellings and remove any technical jargon that may make it difficult for the potential participants to provide reliable information. Also, the forms were proofread to identify exculpatory language that would otherwise compromise the respondents' legal rights. Furthermore, both the consent sheet and the PIS were sent to the assigned ethical approval committee in the University for final approval.

Two weeks before data collection, the approved participation information and consent sheets were shared with the three chosen PHEIs both at faculty, senior management, and student level. A similar practice was done with MoHE officials. Prior to sharing the PISs, oral and written consent was sought with the PHEIs' executives to allow me to research their institutions. Upon consenting, I distributed the PIS/Consent Sheets to the senior management, MoHE employees, faculty members, and students via emails to be read and comprehended before the actual interview/data collection date. All the signed consent forms were collected from different groups on the same day of meeting them except academic faculty who sent their consents to the assigned focal point and then collected accordingly. Voluntary participation was ensured as the subjects were given due respect, time, and opportunity to make their decision as to whether to take part in the research or not – through the consent forms. These principles ensured that all the participants choose to take part in the study at their own free will and have been fully informed about the procedures of the research and potential risks if any (Connelly, 2014).

Research ethics was observed to ensure optimal potential benefits and fewer risks of harm to the participants. I ensured balanced risks vis-à-vis benefits by maintaining the promise of confidentiality; monitoring the gathered data to foster the safety of the participants – protecting data against unauthorised access; and using data collection procedures that present the least risk to participants and which are consistent with responding to the research



questions. Taking the consent from all participants was vital to ensure that participants understood the purpose of this study and they are willing to take part with no force from any external parties. This discipline was essential in this research since the risk of power relationship might appear as I am working in a government entity that supervises all PHEIs and participants might think that they must participate to satisfy this relation. Also, participants might give me the ideal answers to my questions as they think that this is exactly what I want to hear. The impact of the power relationship was minimized by informing all participants that the participation in this study is optional and voluntarily. Also keeping the identity of the institutions and all participants anonymised have helped in encouraging institutions to take part smoothly. During the research, the management of PHEI was required to expose their management strategy to explain the problems faced in education quality. This dilemma may have created ethical issues for the participant regarding how much inside information can be exposed and how I will view this information. There was no invasion of privacy, breach of confidentiality, nor utilisation of study procedures that would cause psychological, emotional, or social harm to the respondents. I followed the ethical considerations laid out in the study to ensure an excellent and trusting relationship with participants. In summary, I protected the research participants' identity and confidentiality during the research.

Chapter Conclusion

This Chapter has explained how the research was conducted to achieve the research objective of this study by following the research ethics. An interpretive framework was adopted for the study. A mixed-method combining qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for inquiry on the research questions. Interviews, focus group, and questionnaire were used as the methods for collecting data. The Chapter reflected the steps I followed in



order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study results. The data collection process and the thematic analysis of the study is also addressed. The challenges encountered, and the ethics maintained in the research process was detailed next. The next Chapter presents the findings of the study.



Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

This Chapter presents the findings of the study which are grouped based on the four main research questions of this study. The findings under these groupings are arranged based on the categories and themes that emerged during data analysis. Participants responses are provided as evidence to support study findings. The differences in perspectives of the stakeholders related to key factors for assuring offshore education quality, the role of IUPs, the fulfilment of these roles by IUPs are brought out in this Chapter. Insights from existing literature were used to interpret the study findings and develop descriptions (Merriam, 2002), which added to the rigour of the study. The findings also highlight the expectations of the stakeholders from the offshore programmes, areas for improvement and the level of satisfaction with these programmes. This Chapter concludes by summarising the key findings of the study such as the quality of offshore programmes in Oman and its importance to higher education as perceived by different stakeholders. These key findings are used to develop new understandings in the subsequent discussion chapter.

Findings

The study findings presented in this section are grouped into four key themes that are aligned with the main research questions to ensure that all questions are addressed. Each key theme is further categorised based on sub-themes extracted from the content analysis of participants responses (See Appendix 7-Data Analysis Process). The main participants of this study are the relevant stakeholders representing PHEIs in Oman, these are: Management,

Faculty, Students of PHEIs and MoHE staff. The four key themes presented in this section are: -

1. Key factors perceived as vital to ensuring the quality of teaching
2. Key Perceptions on responsibilities of IUP
3. Perceptions on IUP fulfillment of responsibilities
4. Regulatory changes for improving offshore programmes

The findings of this study are supported by participant's responses gathered through face to face interviews and an online questionnaire. The stakeholders considered eligible for each theme and from whom data were collected and analysed are provided in below table

(Table 4.1).

Themes	Stakeholders			
	Senior staff of MoHE	Management of PHEIs	Faculty	Students
Key factors perceived as vital to ensure quality	√	√	√	√
Key Perceptions on responsibilities of IUPs	√	√	√	√
Perceptions of IUPs fulfillments of responsibilities		√	√	
Regulatory changes for improving offshore programmes	√	√		

Table 4.1: Stakeholders relevancy to the study themes



The overall number of respondents in this study are =74 persons in different categories (i.e management, students, faculty and MoHE staff). Table 4.2 summarises the distribution of participants upon their categories and type of institution:

Total Number of Participants from Management	
Franchised	2
Validation	2
Branch	2
Total # management	6
Total Number of Participants from Faculty	
Franchised	8
Validation	11
Branch	5
Total # faculty	24
Total Number of Participants from Students	
Franchised	Group #1=7
	Group #2=6
Validation	Group #3=8
	Group #4=7
Branch	Group #5=6
	Group #6=7
Total # students	41
Total Number of Participants from MoHE Staff	
MoHE	3
Total # MoHE staff	3
Total number of overall participants=74	

Table 4.2: Total number of overall participants from PHEIs and MoHE

Theme 1: Key Factors Perceived as Vital to Ensuring Teaching Quality

Data analysis revealed that different stakeholders perceive the quality of teaching differently according to their level of knowledge, interest, and experience (Lapina *et al.*, 2016; Sahney *et al.* 2006). Different interpretation and understanding of various stockholders on quality of teaching resulted in a wide range of repetitive terms and phrases. These terms and phrases were then clustered to inform meaningful themes that respond to the key questions. Accordingly; views of different stakeholders yielded the following sub-themes (a) *Quality of teachers*, (b) *Quality of programme content*, (c) *Programme management*; and (d) *Student support*.

Quality of Teachers

There is little consensus on what constitutes ‘excellent teacher’ and how the quality of teachers is best attained (Akiba, & Liang, 2016). However; some researchers described teaching from the angle of knowledge possession of the subject; others see it from the angle of teachers ‘ability to transfer knowledge and stimulate students learning. Among different opinions, Goodwin (2010) found that there is no clear set of standards that can describe competent and good teachers; and this task becomes even more challenging among a variety of communities and contexts (Goodwin, 2010). Quality of teachers implies knowledge of the subject and the ability to adapt this to the local context (Wilkins, Stephens Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). Examination of the open-ended responses of this study indicated that teacher's quality regarding knowledge advancement, experience, and interaction with students’ matters are the most important criteria to improve teaching quality. This is also reflected on how different Omani stakeholders described the quality of teachers, as each



participant expressed different views of skills and behaviours that good teacher should possess.

The majority of management members (deans and head of departments, N=6) from different affiliation models believed that the quality of teachers is a vital factor in ensuring the quality of offshore programmes. However, views expressed by management members were influenced by the affiliation model. For example, in a branch campus model where an affiliate university establishes a subsidiary in the host country (Knight, 2011), the dean finds that qualifications and expertise of the teachers are expected to match with that of the IUP to ensure quality teaching. In a validation model, providing comparable student experience for the partial deliveries of the course in the host country and IUP campus was considered significant for teaching quality. This perception of quality is in alignment with the expectations of the validation model to maintain quality across various location and structures as observed by Trevor-Roper, Razvi, and Goodliffe (2013). The Dean of the franchised model stressed the importance of effective teaching through proper selection of faculty who can add value in the student's experience by using advanced teaching methods and improve students' attitude toward learning. The following response from a management member of the franchise model attest to this:

“For me, faculty are the dynamo of teaching quality, they can make a big difference in shaping students' attitude toward learning, and the way student sees the world. ... it is not the qualification alone that make a good teacher; it is the expertise of the teacher to move student's knowledge from one level to another.” (Management interviewee #2, Franchised Model)

Similarly, faculty rated the quality of teachers as the most critical element to the quality of offshore programmes. Faculty were asked about their perceptions on the key element to the quality of offshore programmes, among eight options, 100% of the respondents (N= 24 faculty members) consider that quality of teachers who teach the programme as the most important element and 21% of the faculty ranked it as the top element among others (see Figure 4.1).

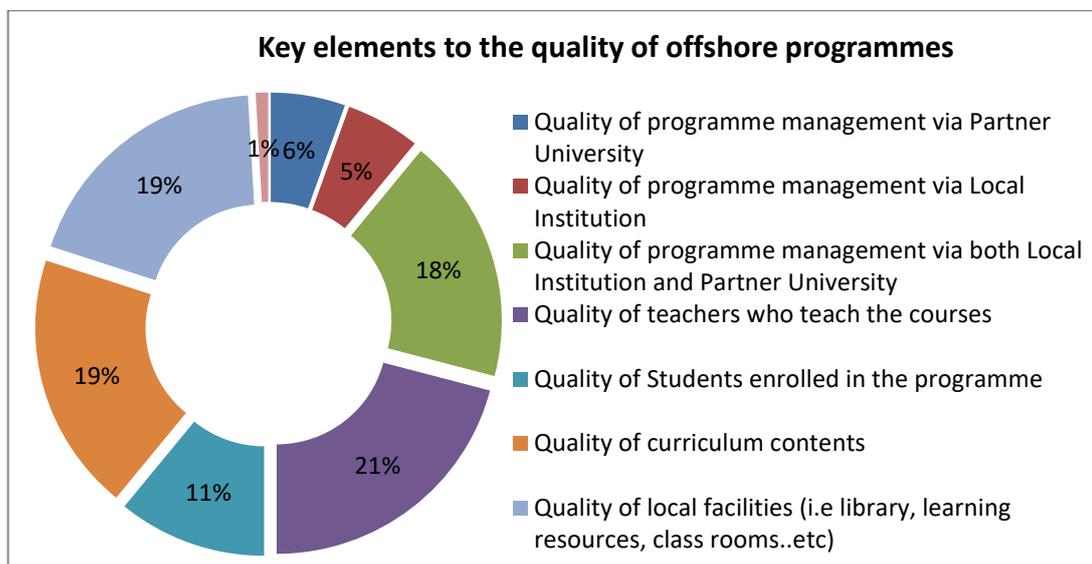


Figure 4.1: Key elements to the quality of offshore programmes from faculty perspectives
(N=24)

This consensus among all faculty endorses the importance of teaching quality to improve the overall offshore programme quality. Overall, the results indicated that 75% of faculty were satisfied with the level of support they are given as teachers by IUPs in different teaching aspects-See Figure 4.2.

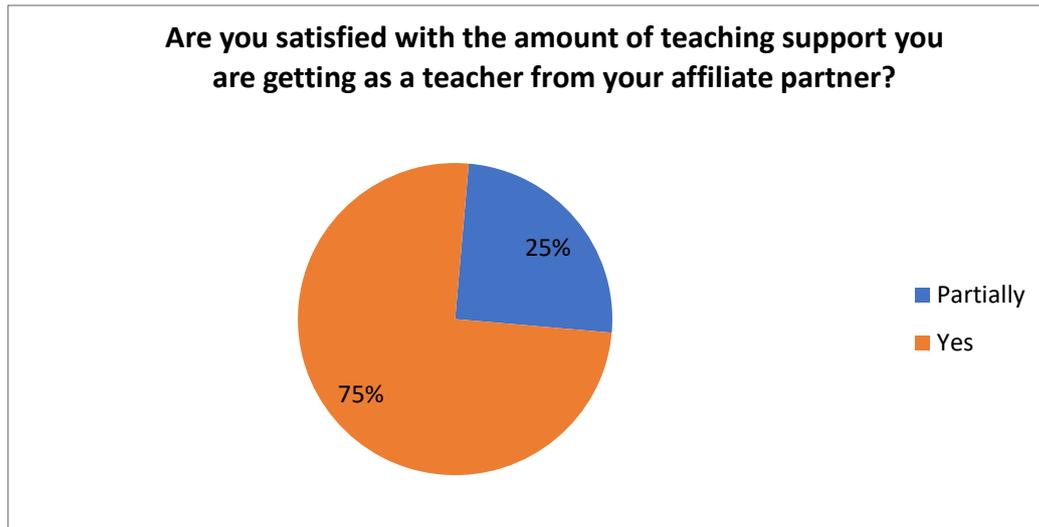


Figure 4.2: Faculty satisfaction about the teaching support given by IUP (N=24)

79% expressed their satisfaction about IUPs support in providing them with the needed materials and guidelines on how to teach offshore curriculums, 87% indicated that all relevant teaching material were made available when needed. However, 30% of faculty highlighted the need for more meetings and open communication with their counterparts in IUPs. Overall, faculty were positive about the training they are given by IUP, and 80% expressed their agreement about the availability of enough training. However, 41% of faculty feel that the available training is not very effective or partially effective, which indicates that training required more attention by IUPs, and the focus should be on providing more effective and relevant training rather than the volume of this training.

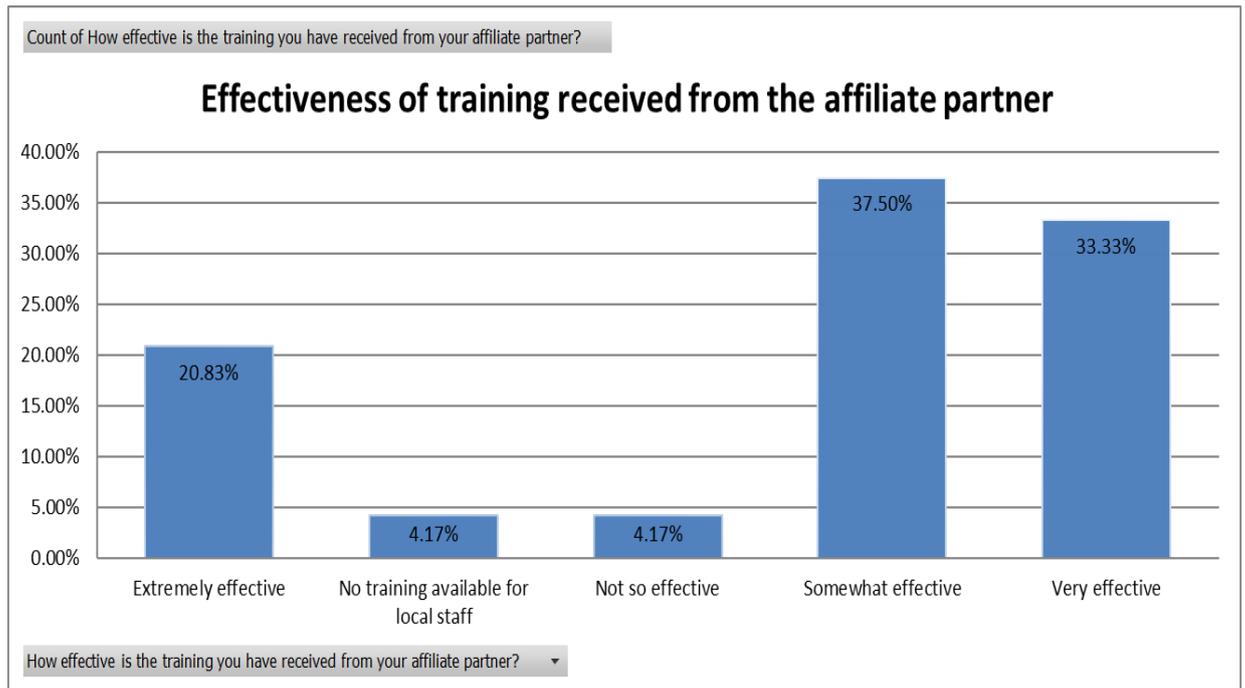


Figure 4.3: Training effectiveness (N=24)

Students expression of the elements associated with teaching quality varied according to the model of foreign partner association (i.e., franchise, branch or validation). These variations resulted from the nature of student-teacher interactions facilitated by the model and teaching methodologies deployed. Students from the validation model were of the perspective that ability of teachers to connect with the students through interaction and co-operation, enabling them “*to be good learners*” and help them “*to progress and excel in the course.*” is important for teaching quality. The following quotes of the students stand as a testimony to this observation:

“Teacher's added value to our previous knowledge” “...continuous feedback about our performance” “...knowledge and the ability of teachers to direct, connect and interact with us.” (FG 3, Validation Model)



“...effective teaching is not related to the qualification of the teacher; however, it is highly related to their ability to make learning relevant and make sense to the learners.” (FG 4, Validation Model)

The data provided by students from the franchised model also highlighted teaching attributes as most important for effective teaching in offshore programmes. Teaching attributes refer to the experience of the teacher, educational qualifications, subject-specific certification, and pedagogy approach (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014). Study findings show that students consider teachers pedagogic approach as the most important teacher attribute. However, there is variation about this attribute based on the type of affiliation model. Students from the branch model perceive the quality of teacher as related more to the ability of faculty to transform students as independent learners, improve their critical thinking, and expand their research capabilities as mature learners.

A Majority of students in this model emphasised the importance of faculty’s attributes and their ability to upgrade students’ knowledge and learning experience. Students of branch model are also concur with their colleagues from the validation model that effective teaching is not related to the faculty’s qualifications or the number of teaching years. They see effective teaching from the angle of student-staff relationship which goes beyond the traditional way. This might be attributed to the fact that the branch campus examined in this study is offering offshore programmes that are provided through an open learning environment, where 75% of programme provision is conducted via online and only 25% done in the local campus. In this type of programmes, students rely heavily on their abilities to be “self-learners” and required limited support from their local and IUP faculty. Students of branch model perceived regular feedback, course contents, clarity of instructions, knowledge



transfer and the availability of resources as important for teaching quality, rather than limit it to teacher's ability. The nature of learning in this model may have resulted in differing students' views on teaching quality from other affiliation models. Students of the branch campus model indicated "*the need for monitoring strategies*" and "*a clear action plan*" to identify the loopholes and issues in the existing offshore programme. Students of branch campus also stressed the need to upgrade local teaching staff by an effective staff exchange programme that gives local teachers the actual exposure of teaching in the same programmes offered by the parent university and vice-versa. One participant noted that this could be achieved by:

"Regular visit from the partner university, systematic visits by flying professors and training programmes/seminars/workshops for local staff". (FG 5, Branch Model)

On the other hand, MoHE staff perceive the quality of teachers as a tool to facilitate students learning. All three participants from MoHE considered the quality of teachers as an important element toward quality education. One of the participants stated:

"No one can deny the importance of teachers in the learning process, although most of the education nowadays moved to be student-centred. Still, teachers are the main facilitators of learning, and their role is vital to improve students' experience." ((Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff)

There were different views among different stakeholders on the importance of teachers' attributes to achieve this. Students place importance on the quality of interaction to enhance



independent learning, while other stakeholders stressed on academic qualifications and credentials. However, there is a broad consensus that teacher quality is contingent on enabling the movement to student-centred learning and the ability to discover their capabilities. This aligns with the finding of other studies that quality of instruction strongly influences student outcomes over other factors such as subject knowledge, teacher beliefs and subject knowledge (Coe et al., 2014).

Programme Content

Quality of content was another common theme among the four groups of stakeholders. *Programme content, curriculum design, content localisation, programme contextualisation, course design, advanced curriculum, and course contents* are different phrases used under this theme to express almost similar programmes aspect which is “programme content”. It may be noted that study findings did not evidence the same level of importance on this theme across all categories. Faculty and management participants were in agreement about the importance of this aspect for teaching quality. Students gave lighter importance to this aspect, whereas MoHE participants found it also as an important factor for teaching quality. This might be attributed to the amount of knowledge and relevancy of this element to the academic staff and management group. The localisation of the curriculum was an important aspect highlighted by stakeholders for improving quality. These expectations can presents challenges to offshore programmes as noted by (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Majority of management members perceived that contextualisation of teaching contents needs great attention when designing offshore programmes. Management members suggested the importance of having a joint academic committee between IUP and local PHEI before programme delivery to improve contextualisation. Participants proposed that this committee be responsible for aligning curriculum and course materials with the local context.



Management of PHEIs perceived that programme contents need to reflect local market needs and cultural values. One dean stated that:

“The programme has to be in line with local needs and cultural values. Using case studies, scenarios, examples, and stories related to students’ context make learning more relevant”. (Management interviewee # 5, Branch Model)

MoHE officials also equally stressed the importance of developing programmes that share a mutual interest and take into consideration the local flavour through contextualisation and at the same time maintaining the international standard. The response by one participant evidence this:

“...curriculums of the offshore programmes are developed across the borders, but through contextualisation, it reflects the need of the country”.

(Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff)

Quality of curriculum and its continuous development was another aspect that all stakeholders stressed for improving offshore programme quality. However, it may be noted that participants responses on curriculum development were more focused on the localisation of the programme content, rather than improving student outcomes as espoused by Tam (2014). Management members find that elements such as programme design, programme delivery and continued curriculum development as important elements for the quality of offshore programmes. 91% of overall faculty group considered the quality of the curriculum as an important factor in the quality of offshore programmes and 19 % of faculty ranked quality of curriculum as the second key element to the quality of teaching (see Figure 4.1).

Faculty identified that provisions of programme delivery guidelines, teaching materials, and content knowledge by IUP played an important role in ensuring quality. Adaptation of the curriculum to suit the Omani context/culture was also indicated as a relevant and significant factor to assure programme quality. Majority of the faculty members in the local institutions stated that they are not involved in the development of offshore programmes as 54% of faculty responded negatively when they asked about their level of involvement in curriculum development (see Figure 4.4).

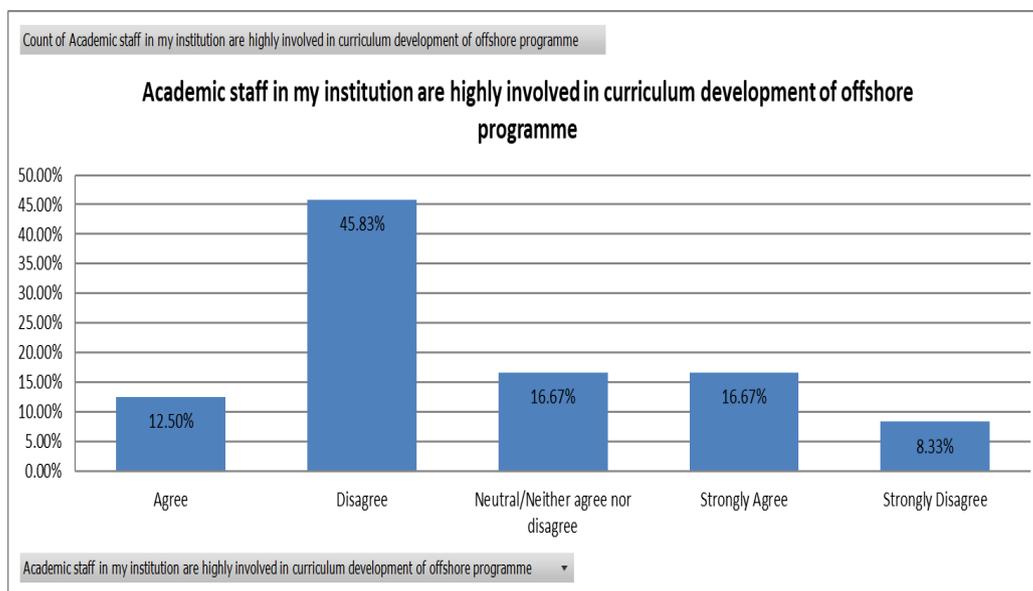


Figure 4.4: Faculty involvements in curriculum development (N=24)

MoHE staff also perceived the curriculum to be an important factor in ensuring the quality of offshore programmes. They shared the views that this area must take special attention from different affiliation parties, i.e., the local PHEIs and IUP beside local authorities (pointing to MoHE here). Two of MoHE participants feels that programme design, curriculum and course contents should be developed with a high sense of responsibility. MoHE staff feel that the course design should be oriented to enhance student learning, as noted by one official:



“I agree that contextualisation is needed as it helps to preserve social values. But the priority is for offshore programmes to develop students that can compete globally. For this, the offshore programme needs to enhance their learning ability”. (Interviewee # 1-MoHE staff)”

These responses show the need to temper stakeholder expectations of localisation with the importance of curriculum development to align with student learning (Shah and Baporikar, 2010) and learning the ability of the students (O’Neill et al., 2015).

Programme Management

This is another important element considered vital to ensuring quality in the offshore programme. Collaboration between the stakeholders, improving programme delivery and management of the facilitation agreement were the three sub-themes that evolved under this category. For improving collaboration, there is a consensus among the MoHE officials, management and academic staff that a clear understanding of collaboration between local PHEIs and IUP is necessary. This perception is in alignment with Kahn (2014) that collaboration is essential for the success of a transnational enterprise. MoHE officials stressed the need for clarity of purpose to achieve effective collaboration between IUP and local PHEIs among MoHE staff. One participant noted:

“A clear purpose is considered very important because it helps in minimising chances of disputes and conflicts between local PHEIs and its academic partner.” (Interviewee # 1, MoHE staff)



Commitment by both parties is another major factor that is considered important by the stakeholders for effective collaboration, which is aligning with the findings of Bullock & Wilder (2016). One management member commented that:

“Commitments of both parties in delivering the best experience to local students, clear communication; a clear mandate for each partner and clear roles and responsibilities for each party are important aspects to ensure proper implementation of offshore programmes.” (Management interviewee # 4-Validation Model)

For improving the delivery of the programme, enhancing the assessment process for degree award, training and monitoring of teachers, continuously improving the teaching design was considered important. These aspects were mostly emphasised by the faculty and management of PHEI, as they are directly influencing and participating in the programme delivery. It was noted that focus to control programme delivery varied with the affiliation models. In the franchised model, having a clear strategy of training and monitoring of teachers was considered essential for teaching quality by participants. One of the management members endorsed that:

“...to better align our deliverables with our partner deliverables we need to have an open dialogue, formal and informal communication to ensure that our staff are well equipped and trained to handle the local requirement”

(Management interviewee # 1- Franchised Model)

This perception might have arisen from the nature of franchised models that required local PHEI to provide an academic programme that is similar to IUP (Trevor-Roper *et al*, 2013). In a branch campus model controlling the elements related to course design, assessment, awarding certificates and access to materials for study by the affiliate universities were considered critical for ensuring quality. Concerning the validation model, participants perceived that regulating the aspects of module materials design, quality staff development programmes, curriculum development, assessment of examinations and quality assurance issues as crucial for quality. Participants from this model also indicated that facilitating course materials design, access of all course materials, provision flying professors, and regulations for admission and setting and marking exams are the critical factors for the franchised model in assuring the quality of teaching by IUP. Participants feedback also highlighted the importance of every institution to indulge in regular quality activities to assess the quality of teaching in offshore programmes. This standpoint implies that the local PHEIs have to take part in assessing the quality of teaching under the framework mandated by the IUP. This insight is not in agreement with the observation by Chen, (2016) & Chapman and Pyvis, (2006) in their studies that in an offshore programme, IUP university plays a more significant role in monitoring quality.

The management of the affiliation agreement is another area considered important by participants for the success of the offshore programme. The study showed that participants favoured regular follow-up of the affiliation's terms of references and scope of services between IUP and local PHEIs to be an excellent tool to meet targeted quality objectives of the offshore programme. One of the management members stressed the importance of this follow-up and noted that “... *it is vital to have a periodic check-up across different agreements terms of references*” (Management interviewee #2, Franchised), another management participant endorsed that by saying:



“..we have regular communication with our partner in different affiliation aspects, this communication informs us about our compliance toward quality standards set by our partner and how far our local institution from these standards”. (Management interviewee #5, Branch Model).

On the other hand, MoHE officials are still not sure if there is a clear understanding between both local institution and the IUP on different affiliation matters. For example, one MoHE official noted that:

“Today we do not have a complete idea about how the affiliation agreement is working for a college. Is there a common understanding? We need a mechanism for constant follow-up” (Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff)

MoHE officials emphasised the need to communicate details about the aim, objectives and action plans efficiently so that all individuals become aware of their roles and responsibilities. The importance of close coordination between both parties', i.e., local and foreign partners on minimising any communication gap was highlighted as essential to achieve this. Overall, it is noted that a lack of student participation and community engagement for improving teaching quality was absent in the participant responses. This participatory perspective may not have been considered as they are not conducive to developing global competitiveness as noted by Schuetze and Slowey (2002). Perspectives of faculty on programme management were seen tempered according to the level of their involvement and expertise in management. Faculty normally involved in the implementation side and know little on how programmes are managed and handled by the management group



from local and international partners. It may be concluded that officials considered the clarity of purpose, minimising communication gaps, and, commitment and participation by stakeholders are the key factors to effective collaboration between local PHEIs and IUPs. Study findings also pointed out that management endorses the importance of regular meetings and communication between them and IUP counterparts to ensure compliance with the agreed scope of collaboration, so they can stay focused and aligned with IUPs requirements to assure the quality of the offshore programmes.

Student Support

Student support was another factor identified by stakeholders having an impact on teaching quality. Students and faculty gave great importance to this factor. However, MoHE staff and management members did not give this factor much importance. Content analysis of students' feedback highlighted the importance of internal support from the local PHEI and external support from the IUP. Internally, students from all affiliation models expressed the importance of local institutions' support in terms of provision of learning resources, engagement with local industry, learning enhancement and provision of language support. Also, a few students from the franchised model raised the need for special financial support and more consideration for students with financial hardship. Students perceive that good English language skills are an essential requirement to improve the quality of teaching and learning in offshore programmes. Poor competency in English was considered to be a major constraint to excel in offshore programmes, especially at the postgraduate level. Language barrier constrained them from understanding different modules in the course. Students consider language skills important element for successful learning and better academic performance. Language barriers affect student's confidence and prevent student's equal opportunity to reach their full potential (Banjong, 2015). Majority of students in all groups were in agreement about the importance of English proficiency. Students attributed their poor



English to many factors, one said “*the admission criteria focus much on our prior learning experience with little focus on our English competency*”, other student said, “*I am exposed to very difficult terminologies in postgraduate programme with limited support from my college*” (FG# 3, Validated Model). Another student said “*I have completed all my earlier qualifications in Arabic and I was accepted in the programme although my English competencies is not up to the required standard*” he added “*I think the affiliate should have greater responsibilities in student selection process and not depend on the local provider who sometimes compromises the language aspect for the sake of increasing the number of students in the programme*” (FG# 1, Franchised Model).

Students highlighted that comprehending the tools and standards deployed by affiliated universities is paramount for learning and gaining knowledge from the offshore programmes. This requirement includes the usage of technology for advanced and interactive learning, understanding educational regulations and maintaining good relations with cultural sensitivity and understanding motivations of the partnering institution. One student from a validation programme noted that:

“*...I learnt a lot from the advanced blackboard adopted by the affiliate partner and also I found it really helps to improve our learning experience..*”

Another student from the branch campus expressed a similar point and commented on the need for more advanced tools to communicate with IUP’s faculty and students, he said:

“*We are missing any live communication with our affiliation, I wish if we have regular meetings or form an academic community by using advanced tools such as video*



conferencing so we can break the ice....I feel frustrated by having 100% virtual relation with very limited face to face exposure” (FG# 6 Branch Model)

The perception agrees with Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) that modern teaching technologies are still underutilised. Mastery over these factors is considered both beneficial and challenging but seen as helping to bring down the differentiation between the education systems in foreign universities and the local universities of Oman. Students opined that the learning attitude and overall motivational level need to be taken into consideration at the time of developing an offshore programme in the Omani context. From these responses, it is noted that students need more space to participate in shaping their curriculum. Proactive and responsive relationships need to be maintained with students to achieve this purpose as noted by Schuetze and Slowey (2002). Students of branch and franchise models highlighted that the provision of clear/regular feedback from the IUP to local students is important learning support needed to enhance quality. One student observed that:

“...the local teachers give no detailed and useful feedback on classwork as all students works are marked and assessed by the foreign university counterpart. Also, students are given very brief feedback and sometimes none.” (FG 2, Franchised Model)

External support from IUP also considered as an important element to improve the quality of offshore programmes. Students expressed the importance of IUP role in supporting their teaching and learning processes. Close monitoring, regular feedback on students work, students and staff exchange programmes, regular training for staff, wider access to IUP learning resources, flying professors, and clear course requirements are examples of students'



perception on the type of support needed from IUP. Also, through students' interviews, it was noted that IUP intervention in language enhancements as an important element to improve the quality of their learning. The study revealed that students considered that the exchange of students between partnering institution an essential element in enhancing quality. This sentiment is reflected in the suggestion by one student:

“Develop an exchange students programme where some local students go for one semester or in a summer course to the parent university and the other way around [...]. So, each group will benefit from this visit in exchanging ideas and compare their experience for the sake of improvements.” (FG 5, Branch Model).

Faculty also find students support as an essential element for better quality provision. The most common factors identified by this category of stakeholders were related to student's academic outcomes, comparing and benchmarking student experiences, proper guidance, and quality of the environment and teaching strategies. Around 60% of respondents from faculty participants ranked classroom environment as one of the top three elements important for effective teaching, whereas, programme management ranked as the fourth element among the other six elements mentioned in the questionnaire. This might be seen as an internal element that impacts students learning and teaching. Also, 91% of faculty considered that quality of internal facilities such as (library, learning resources, classrooms, etc.) as key elements to the delivery of quality offshore programmes. Language aspect also arose from faculty on different occasions. In open-ended questions, nine faculty members stated clearly that English language proficiency is a vital element for students to foster in their learning and to enrich their research capabilities. One participant noted:

“For a better understanding, students should have a strong hold on the English language, to the tune of native speakers”. (Faculty # 8, Q20).

Study findings show the need for understanding the needs of the students to adapt to the requirements of offshore programmes in terms of comprehending the course materials and providing experiences that support learning.

Theme 2: Key Perceptions of IUPs Responsibilities

The interview questions besides questionnaire outcomes showed a major variation on different stakeholders' perceptions and expectations about the role and responsibilities played currently by the IUP. Data analysis highlighted five sub-themes as main roles and responsibilities of IUP. These sub-themes were related to (a) *Teaching Quality* (b) *Programme Management*, (c) *Building Institutional Capacity*, (d) *Evaluation and Monitoring*; and (e) *Student Support*.

Teaching Quality

MoHE staff perceived that IUP is responsible for teaching quality and provide required training to build local capacity of the PHEIs. Data highlighted a common perspective that foreign partner need to take the leading part for assuring teaching quality by continuous review of the teaching methods, close observation of local teachers' performance in classrooms; auditing teachers' portfolios. Such efforts by IUP are seen as essential to increase the overall quality of teaching in offshore programmes as noted by McBurnie (2008) and develop the local youngsters to international calibre as endorsed by Chen (2014). Local PHEIs were expected to ensure that training and professional development programmes for



faculty were conducted on a regular and planned basis. The respondents also perceived that the role of IUP partners is crucial to elevate teaching standards of the local institution.

Participants shared the belief that IUP can enable PHEI faculty to improve their skill set and knowledge to meet international standards through their involvement in teaching offshore programs. The study also elicited viewpoints that favoured local institution having equal responsibility for finding the gaps in the knowledge and skills of teachers. One of the MoHE participants observation stands evidence to this fact:

"...the local institutions also play a vital role in improving educational quality by focusing on areas such as training and development of the teachers". (Interviewee # 1, MoHE)

Management from all offshore models shared the opinion that IUP was responsible for the development of staff members in local PHEIs. Building the capacity of local academic staff through training, orientations and development programmes was perceived positively. The dean of the franchised institution said:

"... we perceive the contribution of our partner in term of staff development positively and this area attract good attention from them" (Management interviewee #1, Franchised Model)

Another management member from branch expressed this area as *"significant but required more attention"* (Management interviewee #6, Branch Model). However; in the validation model, the management expressed their extreme satisfaction and the head of postgraduate studies noted that: *"... extremely happy with our partner contribution in staff*



development and currently working to expand our collaboration to include research and mutual projects other than only regular programme collaboration” (Management interviewee #4, Validation Model)

Management members also expected that IUPs to undertake periodical visits to assess the quality of the staff in the local PHEIs. Study surfaced the need for deployment of a leader coordinator by IUP to assess and maintain the staff quality in local PHEI, which is in agreement with the findings of Kosmützky and Putty (2016). Currently, the IUPs focus only on improving staff skills through local staff development programmes. These programmes do not have a long-term view of local staff development, as it does not take into consideration the skill gap between academic staff teaching overseas and their staff in the parent institution.

Faculty shared similar perceptions with Management members on the role and responsibilities of IUPs. They expected IUPs to collaborate with local PHEI and offer support to improve teaching style, provide academic advising, maintain updated content, ensure performance consistency, and provide regular feedback. Review of the participants' responses brought to light the expectation that foreign partner exert more efforts to upgrade teaching quality to be on par with the home campus of the foreign partner and international standards. However; 91% of faculty participants expect that both IUP and the local institution should be responsible for managing the quality of the programme (Figure 4.5).

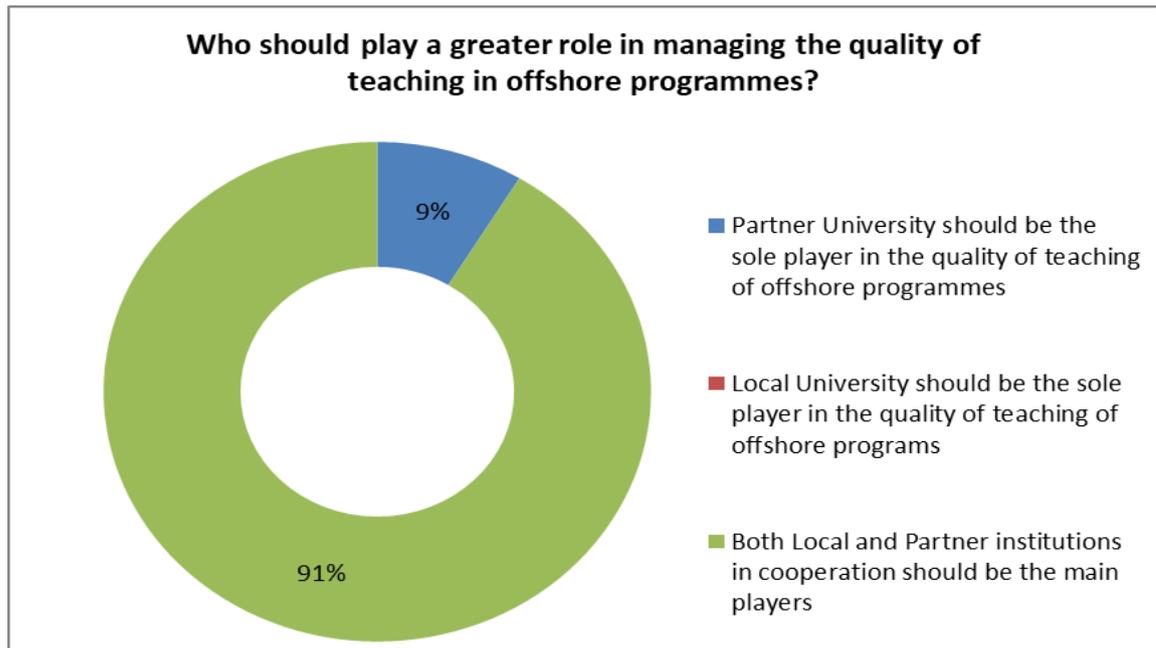


Figure 4.5: Overall responsibility for quality management (N=24)

The study brought out the perception of faculty that performance appraisal of teachers was the most effective method to assess the quality of teaching.

Strategies proposed for assessing teachers' performance included peer review, classroom observations, assessing students' overall performance; and evaluation of department management.

IUP currently handled these activities with minor variation from one institution to another. Data showed that 50% of the respondents opined that both the local PHEIs and IUPs need to be responsible for the performance of teachers. 41% of the respondents indicated that local PHEIs has a more significant role in performance appraisal. Majority of participants rated the effectiveness of the affiliate partners in up-grading teaching quality of offshore programmes as very high -in general-with an average score of 72%. However, faculty in branch campus was the lowest in perceiving this role positively, and their average answers were between 8% to maximum 50%, whereas in the validation model the overall score relies on between 60%-90%. This might be attributed to the nature of the affiliation in the branch



campus model, which put more pressure on staff to follow by the book all parent IUP policies, without the freedom to be innovative and creative in developing their teaching strategies.

Similarly, students also expect greater involvement from local teachers in offshore programmes. For example, in franchise model students expect local teachers to undertake more responsibility in the development of offshore programmes and course assessment. Students found their teachers constrained in some areas as they depend highly on the course outline endorsed by the IUP, with little space to manoeuvre around these outlines. Also, they feel that their teachers are unable to take any decision related to their work assessment, due to restrictions by the IUP. Majority of students in franchised and branch campus found that IUP is dominating all teaching aspects and local faculty has a minimal role in observing their work in which-from students' opinion- impact the course delivery and thus affect the quality of teaching. Overall, students' group from franchised and branch campus programmes perceive for more autonomy to be given to the local faculty in term of teaching strategies and work assessments. On the other hand, students from the validation model were satisfied with the quality of teaching. They demanded sessions by visiting practitioners for more comprehensive understanding and relevant knowledge. Students of validation model informed that visiting practitioners provided them with practical knowledge and connected them with international business perspectives. However, there is also opposition to this arrangement among students, as some argue that:

"There is no value from visiting professors, the language a bit difficult to catch, and classes are very condensed since they come for a short period only." (FG # 4, Validation)



Through this argument, it is noted that the majority of the students found visiting professors are useful but not as an important element in improving the quality of teaching in the offshore programme. Study shows that while there is a consensus about IUPs role to ensure programme quality, there are differences in the perspectives about who should take the leading role for faculty professional development. MoHE officials and students feel that teachers' training and skills enhancement should be done locally as this will increase their sense of loyalty to the local institutions and increase their motivation internally.

Programme Management

MoHE staff believe that IUPs are carrying out an important role in managing different programme components such as programme development, programme delivery, programme quality assurance, and overall supervision. They perceived that the current role of IUPs in providing local institutions with quality manual, detailed programme guidelines, programme policies, students and staff assessments as vital for Omani institutions to acquire knowledge and experience in running offshore programmes. MoHE staff felt that the responsibility of quality should be equally distributed between IUPs and PHEIs. However, officials perceived that the local partner should be accountable more in term of programme implementation and overall programme quality. This requirement was based on the belief that the local partner has a vital role in programme delivery since they are responsible for the provision of the overall learning environment, faculty recruitments; and students' selection. This emphasis is highlighted from the participant observation that:

"The responsibilities toward quality should be equally distributed, however; the local institution should be accountable about choosing the best students, the best teachers, and the best learning environment, so for me, the local institution should carry out the heavier role". (Interviewee # 1, MoHE staff)



MoHE officials also perceived that effective quality monitoring strategy which employs a collaborative approach needs to be developed and implemented by the foreign partners. This effort needs to be complemented by the local partners through active participation and commitment to administer the offshore programme. This clearly shows the pressure on IUPs by local authorities regarding quality as noted by Lane & Kinser (2011). Officials highlighted the danger of poor-quality offshore programmes in the Omani context, as it can result in creating bureaucratic obstacles for long-term growth and success of the entire concept. According to the MoHE officials, this implies that international partners need to ensure that the quality of offshore programmes is the same as that offered on the home campus. The interview findings also highlighted the requirement to consider different internal and external factors while developing the offshore programme in the Omani context. The study identified internal factors such as curriculum contextualisation, methods of teaching, quality of teachers and study material. The external factors that highlighted were the learning attitude of students and their overall motivational level.

Management of all offshore programme models appreciates IUPs role in providing the local institutions with a framework for assuring quality. Teaching materials, course materials, course development, practical knowledge of running the programme; and building local capacity are some factors identified by participants as important responsibilities handled by IUPs. These factors also are seen as crucial for managing the programme and enhancing the quality of offshore programmes. All management members in different models are satisfied with the level of support they are getting from their partners. Data analysis also indicated that the degree of coordination between IUP and local PHEI was a success factor in running offshore programmes effectively. Although different management members acknowledged that IUPs fulfilled its responsibilities as per the agreed scope mentioned in the affiliation



agreement, however; 60% of management members highlighted the need for more support and empowerment to take individual decisions locally. They found that areas such as course design, programme developments, and students' assessments as areas that required more involvements from local since they are actively and directly involved in programme implementation. This sentiment is reflected in the following participant response:

"I am happy with the support from the affiliated university. However, I wish they provide freedom to develop new courses and guide student activities"

(Management interviewee #5, Branch Model)

Faculty responses were aligned with PHEI management, as they also highlighted that provision of detailed manuals and guidelines, localising content to the Omani context/culture, defining classroom dynamics, curriculum development and evaluation is the responsibility of IUP. The teaching support from IUP implied from participant responses is satisfactory as indicated by 90% of the respondents. Teaching support mentioned was related to the design of course structure, prescribing reading and additional reading material for each course, providing an expert to moderate collaborative teaching and conducting seminars. Participants responses indicated that their experience with IUPs might be improved by involving them in curriculum development and sending them to the IUPs for a closer look at their teaching approaches and localising strategies. The staff exchange programme, regular interactions with local faculty, and staff training programmes were indicated by faculty as areas for improvement.

From faculty responses, it can be deduced that participants expect affiliate university to play a more significant role in improving the status-quo of teaching quality, especially with the academic staff involved in programme design, programme development and more



empowerment in managing the programmes locally without IUP intervention to details. 91% of teaching staff believe that both local and partner university should play an equal role in managing the offshore programme, while only 9% of the respondents believe that partner university should be solely responsible for managing the offshore programme (see Figure 4-5). This indicates that participants from management and faculty believe that the local institutions should be given some empowerment to manage some programme aspects especially in the area of programme development and programme design. Study findings show the desire of stakeholders to delegate more responsibilities by IUP to PHEI in running the offshore programme. It also brings out concerns about how such delegation will affect the quality of offshore programmes.

Building Institutional Capacity

Analysis of the data brought out the expectation that offshore programmes will enable local institutions to excel to international standard rapidly. This expectation is in line with Knight (2011) views on the benefit of offshore programmes in enhancing hosted institution's capabilities in teaching programmes with international standards. This achievement is perceived as possible through the exchange of expertise between IUP and the local PHEI regarding programme development, technical support and professional development of staff. It is expected that teaching offshore programmes helps to enrich local staff experience in term of curriculum development, assessment methods, more extensive exposure to learning resources.

MoHE officials expected that interactions with foreign partners would enable system and infrastructure improvements by the adoption of international best practices. This expectation is aligned with the findings of Yirdaw (2016). Also, they expected that the local PHEI could acquire the expertise to improve the student learning experience, boost their



language skills and enhance their global employability. This perception is evidenced by the observation of one participant:

“One of the affiliation benefits that is obvious to me, that local students will be able to continue their further studies anywhere in the world. Also, local staff will have exposure to different up to date teaching methods. Parent University should help in building a quality culture like the one they have in their parent country” (Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff)

Another participant concurred with this view and said:

“Teaching offshore programmes to help enriching local staff experience in term of curriculum development, assessment methods, infrastructure improvements, wider exposure to learning resources and enhancing the student learning experience and boosting their language skills” (Interviewee # 1, MoHE staff)

The study also brought out the hope of officials that offshore programmes operating in Oman will enable local PHEIs to develop multiculturalism within the country. This confirms the observation by Ehlers (2009) that quality of education is moving towards encompassing cultural viewpoints. Participants highlighted the need for PHEI management to focus more on determining effective ways through which high quality of education and teaching can be delivered rather than efforts on generating higher revenue. However, this proposition may not be readily acceptable to the management of PHEIs.



Management members concurred with MoHE staff officials that IUP role is to enrich and enhance learning and teaching expertise in the local PHEIs. Improving the capability and profile of the institution is identified as a key element to improve quality. The localisation of the course curriculum is seen as essential in achieving this as noted by one participant that: -

“....the course curriculum of offshore programmes are developed across the borders, but through contextualisation, it reflects the need of the country”

(Management interviewee # 6, Branch Model).

Through this approach, participants expected that the PHEIs could gain the benefit of awarding an international degree that is aligned with the local context. Majority of management members highlighted the importance of collaboration in building local capacity, particularly in teaching and research. Some management members highlighted the role of IUPs in building quality culture through regular quality activities, workshops, visits, and quality audit that is currently undertaking by IUPs. This role founded as vital especially by members from the franchised model where they feel that the IUP is heavily involved in training academic and administrative staff in different quality aspects. One management member stated this: -

“Through affiliation, the local institution becomes an active learning organisation, and every member in this organisation indulge in different quality aspect”. (Management interviewee #2, Franchised Model)

Stakeholders gave priority to developing PHEI to the international standards in terms of teaching quality. Study findings also show a desire that PHEIs develop competencies to embed cultural competencies in the programme.

Evaluation and Monitoring

All stakeholder groups highlighted the important role of evaluation and monitoring currently executed by IUP to assure proper implementation of offshore programmes in the local context. MoHE staff endorse the necessity of this role in improving the quality of programmes. They found that regular quality review by IUPs as a key success factor toward the quality of offshore programmes implementations. All MoHE staff stressed the importance of this role to support national objectives in improving the quality of programmes. One participant said:

“The external quality role that international university is currently playing in controlling the quality of offshore programmes is supporting our national agenda to raise the quality of local programmes which impact the quality of graduates.” (Interviewee #1, MoHE)

However, one of the participants opined that IUPs might be focusing solely on the input and process of the offshore programmes quality, with little focus on the outcomes. This perception was prompted by the quality of graduates produced by the offshore programme. A participant noted that:

“I think the foreign partner is doing a good job in controlling the input and processes of offshore programmes delivery, but I think they should put more

efforts on assuring the quality of graduate as this will provide good indicators of the overall quality of the programmes.” (Interviewee #3, MoHE)

Management participants perceived that regular evaluation and monitoring by IUP is crucial to assure the quality of offshore programmes. This outlook aligns with the perception of MoHE staff officials. PHEI management sees the local institution as a facilitator and IUP as the main quality agent and driver in the quality equation. Different management members appreciate the role of IUP in providing them with all quality guidelines used by the affiliate partners. However, they also feel that the regular feedback on their performance is key for improvements and to ensure that local institution is offering the programme with the best standards. One of the management members endorsed that by saying:

“The evaluation conducted by our partner is informative and summative and keep showing us the areas of improvements, this quality check is helping us to ensure that we are in the right track and meeting the best quality standards.”

((Management interviewee # 2, Franchised Model)

Faculty also referred to the importance of the regular evaluation and monitoring by IUPs to ensure that the quality of teaching is in line with their partners. They found that a regular feedback on areas for improvement related to teaching as a very useful tool for quality improvement. Open-ended questions with faculty informed different quality measures were used by the IUPs to enhance offshore programmes implementation, these can be summarised as follows:

- 1) *Recruitment of external examiners to review students work.*



- 2) *Attending random class sessions.*
- 3) *Provision of adequate training and support in best teaching techniques.*
- 4) *Sharing good practice.*
- 5) *Expert subject involvement in exams moderation.*
- 6) *Regular revision of modules content.*
- 7) *Formal feedback for teachers throughout the semester.*

Study findings show the need for continuous performance review of the offshore programme. These reviews need to focus more on evaluating the outcomes, as current priority is to ensure quality in controlling inputs and processes.

Student Support

Students harboured differing perceptions and expectation of student support they currently received from IUPs. It was noticed that students lack a clear understanding of the actual role of IUP as their ultimate concern was focused on receiving the final degree from the partner university. The respondents from the franchise programme were clear of the role of the partner university at a macro level, but they had little information about the scope of responsibilities of IUP. Overall, students are happy by having an IUP with an international reputation, as the most important factor for them is the final degree certificate from the partner university. They know that IUP is responsible for their overall assessment, course material, course resources, students' selections, and conducting the regular course orientation for them. Students also expected the local PHEIs to co-operate and communicate more with the IUP and arrange for a student exchange programme for better exposure. They expect to have more meeting with the evaluation team every semester but complained that they never get a chance to meet with them. This expectation indicates that students want to be more



involved in the evaluation process and their comments should be taken into consideration for any future developments.

Franchise students expressed that more responsibilities such as lectures delivery, academic advising, handling students' appeals and listening to student feedback need to be undertaken by IUP. The students in the franchise model articulated that local staff needs more training in handling different learning materials provided by IUP. On the other hand, the role of IUP was not clear to branch campus students. This ignorance can be inferred from the response of one participant that:

“the role of affiliate partners is a bit vague for me as there is no involvement from the partner university lecturers in any teaching activity.” (FG # 6, Branch Model)

This lack of knowledge is generating the perception that IUP was not contributing as required and involved only in limited activities such as examination moderation and occasional local teacher development programmes. The students expect more active participation from IUP especially in sending visiting professors to the local institution and meeting with students regularly to point out different issues pertains course delivery and kind of supports they need to excel in their programme. To the contrary, students in the validation model were more satisfied with learning support provided by IUP in term of course material availability, learning resources and the provision of visiting professors at the beginning of every semester. However; students' satisfaction might not be attributed only to IUP role, as students expressed their satisfaction about the local support they are getting from their local institution. They found that local teachers are very cooperative, helpful and available when needed. Students in the validation model highlighted some areas for development in the



current role of IUP, students in focused groups raised the need to have further intervention from IUP in term of local teachers' selections and controlling student's entry requirements.

One student opined that:

"...the partner university should have a say on the selected local teachers and the student's entry requirements." (FG # 3, Validation Model)

On the other hand, faculty perceived student support as an area that was currently undertaken equally by both local and international partners. They perceived the current role of IUP in providing the student with all learning material, resources, library access as vital and satisfactory. The data from faculty participants response also brought out the expectations that foreign partner should put more efforts to expose students to the cultural and social norms of the home campus through students exchange programmes. The expectation was to develop student's personality to be better global citizens and facilitate their global career development. This inference is supported by one of the participant observations in the open-ended questions:

"Quality teaching in offshore brings quality research-based teaching, together with a personalised approach to students, considering the establishment of strong cultural, social and economic ties with other countries and cultures". (Faculty # 24, Q8)

The study findings point to the need for authorities to understand student support needs from the perspective of students.

Theme 3: Perceptions on Responsibilities Fulfilment by IUPs

Interview questions and questionnaire were addressed to different stakeholders to measure the level of satisfaction on IUP role and responsibilities to assure the quality of teaching. However; direct questions were addressed purposefully to both management and faculty on their views about the extent that IUP fulfils their commitments and obligation toward the quality of offshore programmes in PHEIs. The insights of these stakeholders in this specific aspect was crucial and added significant value to this study. This is because management members (deans and head of the department) and faculty are highly involved in the implementation of affiliation processes.

Management feedback on this aspect is important as they are directly involved in strategic decisions related to affiliation management. They are involved in evaluating the added value of affiliation and to what extent it served their institutional objectives. From the other hand, faculty's opinions and feedback on the level of IUP commitments in assuring the quality of teaching provided this reliable study endorsement on the impact of affiliation. The faculty is involved directly on the implementation of teaching tools and guidelines provided by IUP. Also, they are the main users and implementers of different quality policies and hence able to judge better through their direct exposures with curriculum, teaching materials, and students.

Three different questions were asked to management members to figure out the extent to which IUP perceived to be fulfilling their responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programmes at the local PHEIs. One question was asked to get a direct notion on the extent of fulfilment, other on the effectiveness of the current model under the affiliation and the last one was on suggestions for improvement if any. Analysis of responses from management members from different affiliation models shows that there is concurrence that the affiliate universities have been performing well and contributing greatly to assure the



quality of teaching in Omani PHEIs. The majority found that the current model is working well with some modifications. The areas that need improvement were identified as enhancing communication, setting the base for joint research, and increase local staff involvement in course design and assessments. In Branch campus, management was looking for more flexibility in initiating other collaboration with other universities, so they can offer new programmes that currently does not exist in the parent campus. Management of PHEI opined that current affiliation was very stringent, and the local campus does not have any control over programme components such as content, assessment, and development. Franchise programme management seems to be very satisfied with their current affiliation and find it “*exemplary*”, they supported their satisfaction with the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) commendation on the nature of their academic affiliation. Validation model management is also satisfied with their affiliation model and finds it “*comprehensive and collaborative*”.

Similarly, data analysis of local faculty about teaching quality results indicated that 78% of the respondents confirmed that their respective academic affiliation works “*exceptionally well*” in term of improving the quality of teaching in the local institution, while other 22 % perceive that their model requires some minor modification to improve the quality of teaching (See Figure 4.6).

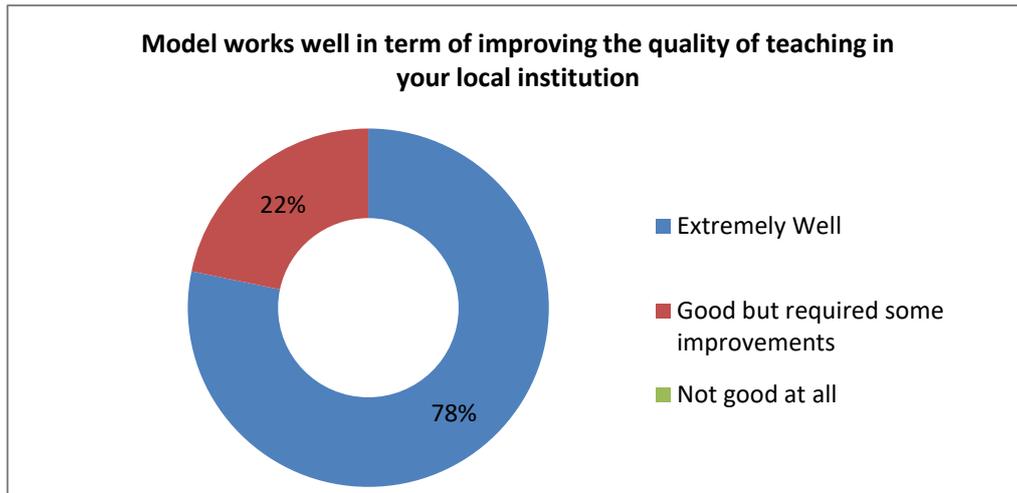


Figure 4.6: The perception of faculty members on the current affiliation model (N=24)

Based on this observation, it is evident that the existing models are working well in assuring teaching quality irrespective of the challenges and the benefits of each model. Tabulation and analysis of participant responses revealed that training and mentoring of teachers offered by the offshore programmes are extremely effective (54%). Only 4% of the respondents perceived that training exercises and sessions are not effective to improve the quality of teaching and other aspects of the offshore programme. Chen, (2016) noted that effective training of teachers could address the challenges in the implementation of the curriculum. From the cross-tabulation of study data, it is noted that there is a strong relationship between effective training and quality of offshore programmes. This deduction was based on the realisation from the study that effective training improves teacher's satisfaction and consequently enhance their teaching skills. This assessment is in alignment with the observation by Chen (2016) and Seah & Edward (2006) that effective training helps local PHEI to establish and implement quality higher education on a global scale by enhancing the performance of both students and programmes.

Data analysis showed that 75% of the respondents are satisfied with the teaching support provided by the affiliated university and the local university, whereas 25% disagreed



(See Figure 4.2). 79% of the respondents perceived that teaching standards in their institutions are at the same teaching standards in IUP. Participants perceived no differences in standards since the IUP is responsible for providing study material, teaching resources, and detailed manuals to the local staff. Study responses also revealed a lack of clarity on the faculty's role in designing and developing the course (46%). The existence of unqualified lecturer's (29.17, %) and lack of communication between affiliate partners and local staff on course improvements (25%), are the most important factors affected teaching quality of offshore programmes in their institutions.

These findings prompted to infer that clarity roles in designing and developing the programmes and improving communication between IUPs and local staff on different teaching elements are the vital components for better programmes implementation as seen by faculty. Quality of learners is also seen to be a very relevant component in improving the quality of teaching. Other challenges indicated by the respondents that are impacting teaching quality, is lack of students' readiness to take offshore programmes, this might be attributed to the high requirements of English proficiency in postgraduate programmes, it is observed that these parameters fall outside the responsibility of IUPs or given little attention by them. Faculty also stressed on the need to develop a staff exchange programme between the local institution and the IUPs to improve teacher quality. According to the faculty perception, sending local staff to partner university to teach at least one semester is seen as the top element that helps in enriching their teaching experience, teaching strategies; and use of best teaching technologies, consequently, improve the quality of teaching in the local PHEI. The results of the study also show that having flying professors from the partner university in the hosted institutions as the lowest factor affecting the teaching quality in the offshore programmes.

Theme 4: Regulatory Changes for Improving Offshore Programmes

To get a clear and concrete understanding of the role of policies and regulation in supporting the implementation of offshore programmes, relevant questions were addressed to the Management of PHEI and MoHE staff. The questions were set to investigate the perceptions of management and MoHE staff on the flexibility of the current policies system executed by MoHE in implementing offshore programmes and areas for improvement suggested in this regard. Two sub-themes were extracted from the respondents' feedback that related to (a) *Clarity and suitability*, and (b) *Autonomy of local institutions*.

Clarity and Suitability

MoHE staff responses provided the impression that the current policy system is very general, lack clarity and out of date. Different MoHE participants highlighted the need for a comprehensive guide that explains clearly the role of IUP and local institution in assuring the quality of the offshore programme. The response of one participant indicates this lacuna:

“... Until now the Ministry has very generic guidelines for affiliation that does not spell out the role of each party. Having clear guidelines is very important, and these guidelines should be used as a template at the beginning of the affiliation process. The affiliation agreement needs to be drafted based on these guidelines.” (Interviewee# 3, MoHE staff).

Another participant indicated that the current policies lack clarity and have to clarify the role of each partner:



“No, I do not think the current policies spell out the role of each partner, and I think this is a very important factor to ensure that each party knows what is expected from him.” (Interviewee# 1, MoHE staff).

The need for revision and updating of current policies was also highlighted as noted from the below response: -

“I think the current bylaw is somehow out of date as these bylaws are developed in 2000 in the form of affiliation agreement template. After eighteen years of practice, I think the Ministry needs to revisit the current bylaws and utilise its experience for the last two decades in improving this template.”
(Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff).

The study also brought the importance of defining the scope of responsibilities to enforce accountability. Currently, the system does not evaluate the effectiveness of the mutual relation between IUP and Local PHEIs. Clear responsibilities will allow setting criteria for evaluation and thus facilitate accountability. One viewpoint from MoHE staff emphasised that:

“Since the government is the main driver behind the idea of academic affiliation with international parties, I strongly support for having a clear scope of responsibilities, so the government (pointing to MoHE here) can evaluate the effectiveness of this relation.” (Interviewee # 2, MoHE staff)

This standpoint is countered by another stance which favours a passive role for the policies. This angle is expressed in the statement of one participant that:

“I think we should leave the areas for collaborations and shared responsibilities open between both parties. I am not with having guidelines that keep this relation captive to a set of items and clauses.” (Interviewee# 1, MoHE staff).

This view is aligned with the globalisation pressures with public choice theory (Gidley, et al, 2010). The same participant suggested the need to develop clear KPIs that measure the level of commitments of each party and ensure that responsibilities are met:

“Each partner should define his role clearly and share a set of KPIs to ensure that their roles are met. MoHE role should focus on ensuring that there are clear quality arrangements between both parties.” (Interviewee# 1, MoHE staff).

This concern may be based on the assumption that PHEI looks after their interests in a competitive market and give less attention to quality (Massy, 2004). Management of PHEIs speaks the same language expressed by officials on the need for clarity and appropriateness of current policies. Majority of respondents (both deans and HoDs) confirmed that MoHE should have clear policies that are outcomes-based not process-based. Top management value the efforts exerted by MoHE to accept different affiliation models and urge for more flexibility in the system. One of the participants expressed the need for improvement in the current system and particularly in programme licensing process, stating that:

“...the current regulation related to programme licensing is the same for all programmes delivered in the country whether these programmes are locally designed or imported from well-known universities”.

He added: *“...Since the motive behind having offshore programmes is to implement programmes that are internationally accredited and already delivered and endorsed elsewhere so what is the use of having these programmes tested again locally.”* (Management Interviewee# 3, Validation Model)

Management members agreed about the need for more flexibility in term of licensing process. Participants perceived that these processes need to rely more on the IUP system since the programme was conducted, supervised, audited and managed by the IUPs. Some respondents raised the issue of system rigidity as the current process does not differentiate between programmes that are locally designed or internationally designed. Also, respondents think that the type of affiliation model is not the key toward best quality practices. Instead, they opined that quality could be monitored on outcomes basis and MoHE should place more attention on this aspect. Management members also highlighted that the current policy of imposing affiliation to all PHEIs as a condition for institutional and programme licensing has to be revisited. Although affiliation might be a good policy at the beginning of PHEIs developments, however; management members think this has to be changed, and the maturity of the sector has to be taken into consideration. One management member stated:

“The regulations that the ministry puts, although it might be harsh at times, are good for the early stages of private sector development. However, the

maturity that took place is massive, and ministry should consider that.”

(Management interviewee# 1, franchised Model)

Study findings show the need to update the regulations in terms of the responsibility of partners and an outcome-based focus. Stakeholders expect regulations to be flexible to accommodate the capability of the offshore programme partners and at the same time encourage improving quality.

Autonomy of Local Institutions

There is a consensus among different management members on the importance of IUP role in improving the quality of offshore programmes, especially in term of process development and regular quality check. However, 80% of the participants indicated a lack of institutional autonomy in the current regulatory system. MoHE was perceived to be more flexible in terms of affiliation model selection and choosing the appropriate partner. However, current regulation imposed certain licensing process to satisfy local needs. These processes hinder the role of the local institution in improving the programme quality and insist on high-process control from the IUP. The level of control suggested by MoHE does not help the local institution to have the "*know-how*" and to develop its own quality culture. The respondents indicate that the current system put great pressure on the local institutions to go for two ways of licensing processes, one from the IUP and the other one from MoHE. Each licensing procedures has different scope and sometimes contradicts with each other in which create a lot of confusion to the local institution. One of the participants from the branch campus explained this by saying:

“I think MoHE has to reconsider its current programme licensing process to give the local institution the freedom to offer similar programmes of parent university without local intervention” (Management interviewee # 5, Branch).

Another participant from the validation model expressed the same worries and stated that:

“The programme normally goes through a very stringent validation process in UK. ... ministry also required another local licensing where local reviewers have to recheck the programme contents and requirements. These processes are very rigid and add an extra burden to the local institution” (Management interviewee# 3, Validation).

The responses of different management teams have raised the issue of process centralisation and lack of empowerment to the local institution in which affect the autonomy of these institutions. This situation considered as one of the main challenges faced in the current bylaws and required necessary modification. On the other hand, MoHE staff highlighted the need for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to ensure better implementation of offshore programmes. However; they believe that the current Ministry’s licensing requirements work as safeguard to protect local identity. The views of MoHE staff indicates the need for a clear allocation of responsibilities between IUPs and PHEIs for effective implementation. Although the Ministry official confirms the need for more empowerment of local PHEIs in managing the programmes, however; they still perceived the need for government intervention which is contradicting to the management of PHEIs views which seek for more autonomy. These responses show the need to control the programme content to protect local culture, but at the same time not allow the regulatory controls to be



seen as raising of trade barriers (Knight, 2007). However, some MoHE staff suggested that the Ministry should focus more on outcomes rather than process and setting up clear accountability platform. The study also brought out the suggestions to amend bylaws and allow learning from best international practices to minimise bureaucracy on the current policies. MoHE participant stated that:

“Good to learn from different international practices to inform the required amendments in the current system. Ministry should find ways to improve its current licensing system and reduce the amount of time, efforts and paperwork needed for approval” (Interviewee# 2, MoHE).

Overall, the findings of this area indicate a need to simplify the licensing process without compromising accountability and protecting the local identity.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter concludes by informing the key findings of this study which can be summarised as below: -

- Interaction by qualified teachers that enhances independent learning and help students to discover their capability is important for offshore programme quality.
- Stakeholders expect programme curriculum to suit local context and culture
- It is perceived that collaboration between committed stakeholders is essential for the successful working of the offshore programme.
- Students need understanding, support and experiences that enable them to adapt to the needs of the offshore programme.



- Developing local capability by training and developing local teachers and empowering them for student evaluation is considered important by stakeholders.
- There is an expectation that management of PHEI is to be delegated with more responsibilities in designing, developing, assessing offshore programmes and embedding cultural values.
- Exposing students and faculty to the culture and norms of the home campus is considered important by stakeholders to raise the quality of the offshore programme to international standard.
- Developing research ability of the staff and assignment to IUP campus is considered important to enhance instructional quality.
- Ensuring student quality that meets the requirements of the offshore programmes is a challenge due to the lack of English language proficiency and non-exposure to the latest teaching methods.
- Affiliation guidelines need improvement to reflect a clear scope of affiliation partners.
- Affiliation guidelines need to be flexible to allow more empowerment and delegation of responsibilities to PHEI from IUP.

The study findings reveal that offshore programmes provided by PHEIs in Oman contribute to improving the quality of higher education in Oman. Students perceive that offshore programmes by PHEIs provide an opportunity to gain a prestigious international degree without leaving Oman. MoHE, Management and Faculty perceive that offshore programmes improved teaching standards and the capability of local institutions. Stakeholders such as MoHE representing the government and local faculty of PHEI are concerned about the impact of offshore programmes on cultural and social values. This preponderance is seen putting pressure on offshore programmes for localisation of the



programme delivery and contextualisation of the programme content. Hence, while the stakeholders are satisfied with the performance of IUP in terms of education standards, more efforts are seen needed for localisation of offshore programmes. Students' perspectives are solely influenced by improving their skills and career. Responses by students also revealed the need for increased student support in areas of performance feedback, language skills; and participative learning. Perspectives of MoHE officials were aligned to the government vision for developing national capacity, preserving social values and identities. Faculty and Management of PHEI perspectives were based on the objectives of improving the capability of the institution and teaching quality. Study findings also revealed that participants placed great importance to collaboration between local PHEI and IUP for the success of the offshore programme. Stakeholders were interested in having more responsibility delegated by IUP for student assessments; programme development.

Stakeholder responses were limited to activities within the PHEI and academic operation. Elements of industry involvement or social community interfaces were absent in the responses of the participants. The themes that emerged from the analysis helped to identify differences and alignment of perceptions between stakeholders. It is noticed that the motivations and knowledge of the stakeholders constrained their perceptions. Reflection and analysis of the themes in the study findings provided generalised ideas and construct for discussion on the study (Richards, 2005). This analytical process enabled generalisation study findings and develop a quality framework for quality assessment in higher education offshore programmes. Chapter 5 that follows provides this knowledge that emanated from the interpretation of study findings.



Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The theoretical framework (see Chapter 2) of this study based on Gap Analysis and Social Inclusion theory guides the new understandings generated in this discussion. Gap Analysis theory (Langford, Raymond, Ret, Huynh, & Lewis, 2008) enabled to understand the differences harboured by different stakeholders between the expected and perceived role of IUP in assuring the quality of the offshore programme in Oman. The theoretical framework viewed any gap in the perceptions and expectation as a lack of understanding of stakeholder needs and significance. This discussion section builds on the findings of the study to understand the root causes of this variation or its complexity. Findings from Gap Analysis are complemented with insights from Social Inclusion theory and existing literature that serves as a warrant (Gold, Holman and Thorpe, 2002) to understand the underlying reasons and their impetus. This approach enabled to infer various factors and process that explain the gaps identified. The explanations and insights from this discussion section expose the reader to varied perspectives and knowledge that will be useful to understand relevant issues faced in similar future contexts. The process of the new knowledge created in this chapter is summarised in Figure 5.1 below: -

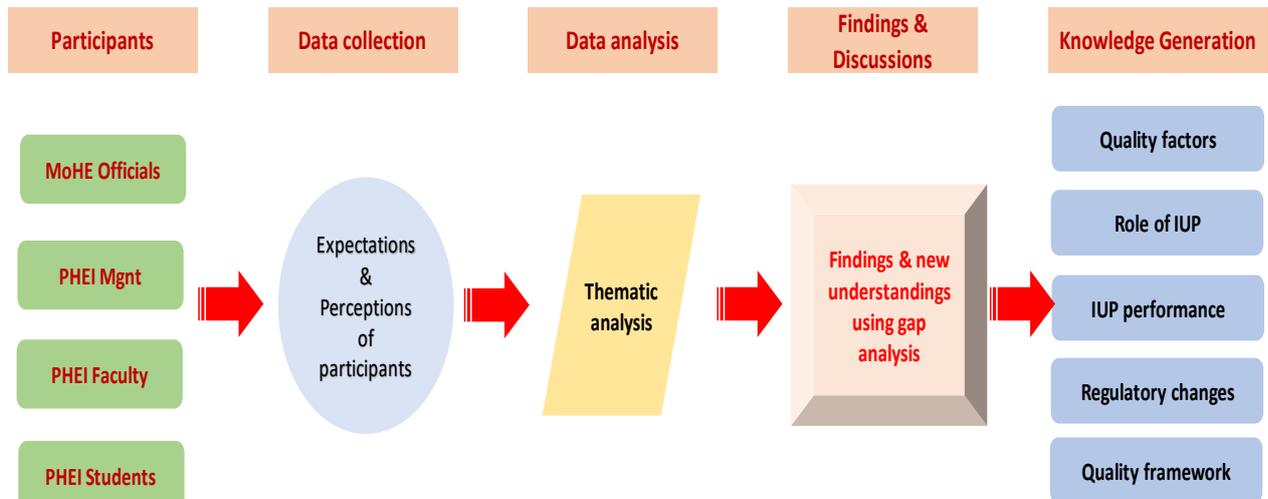


Figure 5.1 : Research study process

The narrative of this section is aligned with the research questions to enable the reader to correlate with the study findings and research questions easily.

Main Elements Vital to Assure Teaching Quality in Offshore Programmes

The discussion on the quality factors is arranged based on the product (student outcome), process, and presage conceptualisation of higher education quality dimensions by Gibbs (2010) to achieve a systemic perspective and enhance rigour.

Presage Elements

The study findings indicate that the shortcomings in student selection process are creating challenges for the quality of offshore programmes. Offshore programmes must balance the need for being profitable with the need to select students who meet the required offshore programme standards. The study shows the presence of students who lack the required skills and adequate motivation for learning. This confirms the significant gap existing between secondary general education standards and the requirement for tertiary higher education in Oman (Al Najar, 2016). This deficiency is especially pronounced in term



of English competencies, as evident from student responses in focus groups. Only a few students spoke fluently and with confidence. Though the development of the General Foundation Programme Standards by MoHE and OAAA has improved the situation (OAAA, 2015), the majority of Omani high school leavers suffer from weak English competencies. The low learning interest and motivation of some students also render them ill-equipped with the requirements of the offshore programme (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007).

The study shows that quality in offshore programmes needs to consider stakeholder interests relating to programme reputation, localisation and preserving local culture. Stakeholders expect offshore programs quality to enable students to have a learning experience that is socially empowering. This requires a better understanding of student needs and collaboration between stakeholders.

Process Element

Collaboration between IUP and local PHEI is essential for the success of offshore higher education programmes (Kahn, 2014). Study surfaced the challenges faced by PHEI and IUP to collaborate for managing the offshore programme, PHEI management is involved mostly on enrolling students and administration while leaving the task of maintaining educational standards and curriculum management to MoHE and IUP. Hence, it may be inferred that PHEI management is more focused on the economic performance and survival of the institution, than the quality aspects of the offshore programme. This preponderance on economic performance can hinder the efforts to develop programme capability in terms of developing teachers, providing facilities and support to improve student learning (Al Abri, 2016; Massy, 2004). This insight confirms with the caution of Kettunen (2015) and Mainardes, Alves and Raposo (2010) that offshore need to consider returns and results for all stakeholders involved rather than owners of the PHEI.



The areas perceived by students to improve the learning and teaching process indicate the need for teachers and PHEI management to focus more on understanding student needs and mitigating them. This finding also aligns with the observation by Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza (2012) that student learning is dependent on factors other than classroom learning. While the stakeholders seemed interested in providing practical learning and multi-cultural exposure, study data showed an absence of awareness on how to achieve these objectives. Stakeholders did not know the potential of community projects or voluntary work to enhance social commitment and cultural awareness. This shows an absence of awareness to develop human potential through service to community and values of generosity (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2008). The materialistic nature of the relation between PHEI and IUP based on their mutual interest is hindering the development of the social consciousness of the learners (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007). This prevents the students from being sensitised to the social and cultural norms (James, 2008) and civic participation needs (McGill, 2008), thereby hindering social access through participation (Gidley et al., 2010).

Product Elements

The quality of education is achieved when the output conforms to the pre-planned goals (Parri, 2006). Study findings show that stakeholders prefer quality standards in an offshore programme to enhance students' overall experience and not confined only to academic achievements. This expectation indicates the desire of stakeholders to move away from narrow perspectives of skill development based on economic objectives to socially empowering learning experiences (Weir, 2009).

However, this motivation for student outcomes needs to be balanced with stakeholder's expectations on programme capability in terms of reputation, localisation, and influence on culture. Offshore programmes achieving international reputation is one outcome that benefits all stakeholders. A reputed offshore programme will motivate local students who opt for



foreign universities to join the local PHEI for higher studies as noted by Akareem & Hossain (2016) and hence prevent the outflow of local funds to a foreign country. Also, it will attract international students to study in the country and gain an internationally recognised degree, thereby earning foreign currency (Ziguras, 2007). Oman is a developing country known for its advanced infrastructure, authentic scenery, stable economy, and political stability. It ranks the most peaceful Arab countries according to MENA Global Peace Index (GPI, 2018) and hence can become a preferred education destination for international students provided that a quality higher education is maintained. The authorities (MoHE officials, PHEI Management and Faculty) harbour a balanced mix of economic, social justice and human potential perspectives on the outcome of offshore programmes. However, students seemed mainly focused on their career and economic prospects, which are aligned to the higher perspectives (Eckel & Morphey, 2009).

Expected IUPs Role in Assuring Teaching Quality in Omani PHEIs

Stakeholders identified key responsibility areas of IUP under the categories of reputation & standards, localisation, and continuous improvement; which are detailed below:

Reputation & Standards

It is inferred from the study findings that the thrust by participants on the international stature of IUP is the desire to open international opportunities and recognition for students. The international stature of IUP is crucial to PHEIs staff and MoHE officials. This perspective may underly the belief that an established IUP is better motivated and disciplined to maintain the stringent quality and quality assurance requirement of the offshore programme as noted by Trevor-Roper, et al. (2013). The importance placed by stakeholders to the undiluted implementation of the standards and practices of IUP in the local PHEI



maybe to achieve equivalent reputation with IUP home campus (McBurnie, 2008). The researcher proposes that these findings reflect the strong desire of both students and PHEIs top management to be associated with a prestigious degree from a reputed international university without compromising any of the essences in the learning process.

Localisation

The study surfaces the contrasting need across all stakeholders to obtain a complete experience of the foreign university in Oman settings while pursuing efforts to localise the programme through knowledge transfer and contextualisation to the local culture and social norms. As noted by Healey (2016), these contradicting objectives can present challenges while devising policies and guidelines for the management of offshore programmes. As proposed by Issan (2016), expectations in the areas of curriculum development, teaching and management need to be captured and incorporated into the offshore programme for localisation to be effective. An effective academic staff and students exchange between IUP and PHEIs can improve the intercultural competency of the participants (Francois, 2015). The study highlights the need to expand the role of the local academic staff in term of students work assessments and regular feedback. However, this approach becomes risky when the PHEI is not familiar or equipped to handle IUP quality schemes (Knight, 2010). This can be resolved if a clear work assessment policy by IUP is given to all local academic staff with proper training on implementation.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is critical to close the gap between expected and actual performance and increase the international stature of both partners (Kahn, 2014). However, the direction of these improvement efforts can pose a problem, as these efforts may have contradicting aims. For example, efforts to improve localisation may lead to increased



satisfaction among stakeholders such as to MoHE and PHEI faculty but can compromise the compliance of IUP quality standards. The negotiation of involvement of an IUP in the management and operation of an offshore programme need to also address the leadership of these improvement efforts (Cantwell, 2015). How the voices of Ministry officials and PHEI faculty can be provided right attention to these improvement efforts also needs to be addressed. The risks and uncertainties arising from these improvements need to be shared between the relevant stakeholders as noted by Soontiens & Pedigo (2013). The study indicates the need for IUP to play a more active role in developing the research capacity of the academic staff. Research focus improves the capability of the teaching staff (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2004) leading to an improvement of the education quality. A regular assessment by IUP specifically focused on auditing research capability development will assist PHEIs to meet set standards and identify improvement areas in research as noted by Sultan & Yin Wong (2010).

Assessment of IUPs Performance in Fulfilling Affiliation Requirements

The findings on the perception of the fulfilment of responsibilities by IUP evolved into two categories of as Teaching quality and Affiliation management, and are detailed below:

Teaching Quality

The study indicates scope for improvement of IUP involvement to improve teaching quality. Strengthening and improving direct communication between staff in both institutions, conducting exchange programme between faculty, allowing local faculty to have live teaching exposure in the IUP and sharing expertise in programme developments and student assessments are some of the approaches that may be deployed to achieve this. These



strategies need good collaboration between partners for their success (Dickie and Dickie, 2008). Based on these conclusions, the researcher proposes the strategy of inviting local academic staff to teach one semester at the partner university, which can enhance participation and commitment (Psomas and Antony, 2017). This approach may be more effective than flying professors from IUPs as it will promote voluntary rather than compulsory mechanisms for improving quality as noted by Martin & Stella (2007).

Affiliation Management

The study shows that there is an understanding among the respondents that access to international standards can only be feasible if the Omani institution and the parent institution are both developing simultaneously. The researcher suggests that IUP needs to critically review PHEI resources for developing leadership and core competencies that enhance quality education. The researcher proposes that actions which improve effective collaboration between the partners will enable to achieve this objective. Establishing clear roles and mandate for each partner with clear communication channels is one action that will improve collaboration, and which is easy to establish. Enabling local staff and students of PHEI to understand the nature of both party's relationship will also help but will be difficult to achieve based on study findings. Establishing an accountability measure for each party will enable close monitoring of the collaboration performance. However, finding parameters and measurement approaches for these accountability indicators will be a daunting task. Providing flexibility to the local PHEIs in term of students' assessments and staff participation in programme development can improve the enthusiasm of PHEI staff for collaboration. The success of this approach will depend on how much IUP is comfortable with this delegation and their concerns about the impact on programme quality.

Changes Required in Oman Policies/Regulations for Enhancing Offshore Programmes

The study brought out the tensions between the need for autonomy in offshore programmes functioning and regulate them to assure the fulfilment of national objectives. The autonomy of the programme is required to entice IUPs to affiliate with PHEIs in Oman and ensure quality. Monitoring of the programme is essential to prevent developments that jeopardise the affiliate programme strategy and consequent arising of alternative national strategies for private higher education.

Regulatory Environment

The study findings reveal that the current bylaws about academic affiliation is out of date and required major changes to fit the new developments in the education system. From this understanding, it is proposed to adopt best international practices while reframing the current policies to balance the interest of the stakeholders. Regulatory changes that aim to influence the strategy formulation and inspection framework need to have the goal of improving the learning process and study materials. These improvements need to be directed for improving teaching quality and education standards. It is also recommended that the regulatory change proposals steer clear of any recommendations to amend prevailing unbiased and meritorious process of awarding the degrees by the foreign universities.

Development of Affiliation & Supervision

Study findings reveal affiliation agreements are not fully implemented. Development of an assessment plan to evaluate the degree of collaboration between the partnering institutions may improve compliance with the affiliation agreements. Based on these observations, this study proposes that MoHE develop a comprehensive strategy to oversee different affiliation models and set KPIs to monitor and measure the effectiveness of offshore



programmes in Oman. The researcher also proposes that the government increase its spending on education-related initiatives and encourage foreign players to collaborate with institutions and universities for localisation of offshore programmes. The government can appoint third party specialised agencies to oversee the performance of affiliation agreements. Surveys can also be undertaken by the government that develops longitudinal data on key quality factors and perception of various stakeholders.

Framework for Quality Assessment in Offshore Programmes

The findings and discussions of this study enabled the researcher to develop a framework for assessing quality in higher education. This framework enables to distil the complexity of quality of higher education offshore programmes into easily observable manifestations. The framework is developed in a matrix format, as developing a big picture of the central issue in the study by synthesising the study data via matrices is one of the possible research outcomes (Richards, 2005). The matrix and the explanation of the framework allowed developing a description of the variables and concepts important for the quality of higher education offshore programmes (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, (1995). This matrix framework (see Figure 5.2) can be used by future researchers and practitioners to challenge the study findings or assess the higher education quality by adapting it to their context.

Figure 5.2 : Framework for assessment of higher education offshore program quality

Category	Parameter assessed	Quality evaluation of parameter status			Relevant stakeholders
		Average	Good	Excellent	
Presage	Curriculum	Follows IUP curriculum	Considers learner characteristics	Adapted to host nation culture & norms	IUP, PHEI
	Teacher capability	IUP faculty	Develop local teacher for teaching	Local teachers assess students	IUP
	Host nation policies	Improve national skill capacity, economy	Integrated growth of learners	Encourage research & innovation	Host nation Government
Process	Teaching quality	Students acquire work skills	Practical learning by students	Students with lifelong learning attitude	Faculty
	Student support	Ensure student facilities	Provide feedback and assessment of potential	Positive life skills & long term planning in students	PHEI
	Affiliation management	Increase enrollment, profit	Collaborate to increase localisation	Sustainable development of society	PHEI, IUP
	Regulatory audits	Monitor compliance of affiliation agreement	Monitor effectiveness of PHEIs	Evaluate effectiveness of offshore programs	OAAA
	Community engagement	Interaction with industry	Local community development projects	Cultural festivals	PHEI
Product	Student learning	Skill based learning	Change management	Positive exemplar societal practice	Student
	Graduate profile	Skilled professional	Entrepreneur	Visionary philanthropist	Student
	PHEI reputation	Global research and career opportunities for graduates	Achieve high global ranking	Attract foreign students	PHEI
Theoretical concepts in the framework	Degree of Social Inclusion	Access	Participation/Engagement	Success by empowerment	
	Ideology base	Neo-liberalism	Social Justice	Human Potential	

The quality framework as per Figure 5.2 depicts the parameters identified as important for quality, based on the constructs of Social Inclusion theory, in the vertical columns. The manifestations of these parameters for assessing the quality are represented in the horizontal rows. The categorisation of parameters in the vertical columns as presage, process, and product (Gibbs, 2010) enables to bring in a systems perspective. This systemic ordering (Best and Holmes, 2010) allows overcoming the limitation of currently used higher



education quality measurement based on student outcome or fit for purpose method (Parri, 2006). The manifestation of outcomes for each parameter is arranged in the horizontal rows based on the axiology (Biesta, 2015) of “Average”, “Good” and “Excellent”. Axiology in education refers to the values that provide meaning and directions of the educational efforts. This axiology is proposed by the researcher based on the objectives of Philosophy of Education (The Education Council, 2017) and degrees of Social Inclusion as conceptualised in Social Inclusion theory (Gidley *et al*, 2010). The Philosophy of Education set by the Omani government aims to develop social consciousness and reinforce values of citizenship and Omani identity in students. The government envisages achieving this objective by incorporating the dimensions for human potential improvement that facilitate student transformation into the current higher education quality assurance system of Oman. Human potential focus aspires to develop meta-reasoning and lifelong learning (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010) in the students to bring about comprehensive development of the student (intellectual, social and physical).

Quality of education that portrays neoliberal perspective is considered as "Average" as they fulfil only the minimum requirement. Education quality that indicates student participation and community engagement reflects a social justice focus and hence considered "Good". Education with Student outcomes that indicate social participation and positive life skills are considered "Excellent," as they point out efforts to maximise human potential and points to a conscious effort to meet expectations of all stakeholders. This framework allows the incorporation of all stakeholder requirements and overcomes the limitation of the lack of quality goals in fit for purpose quality concept (Westerheijden, 1999) and absence of a clear definition of quality standards in quality as excellence concept (Lomas, 2002). An explanation of the components of the framework is provided henceforth: -



Presage

Three parameters, i.e., curriculum, teacher quality, and host country policies are identified in this category based on the study findings and discussion. In the curriculum parameter, a PHEI strictly following the IUP curriculum is considered average as it indicates a lack of flexibility and collaboration to localise curriculum as noted by de Wit and Hunter (2015). This approach also ignores student commitment and participation to keep investment low and shows no commitment to developing the teaching faculty of the host country. A curriculum that considers the characteristics of the learners and incorporates the suggestions of the student is considered as good, as it encourages student commitment and participation (Shah and Baporikar, 2010). Such curriculum is instrumental in developing action-oriented students with optimism (Eckersley, Cahill, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2007). When IUP adapts the curriculum to the culture and norms of the host country, it indicates excellent efforts and collaboration with all host country stakeholders to understand and satisfy their needs. This situation indicates synchronisation of cultural sensitivities of the host country (O'Neill et al., 2015), policies of host governments, sustainability concerns of local PHEI, and guiding principles of parent university (Kahn, 2014).

A PHEI employing only IUP faculty is considered as average as it may indicate a lack of interest by both IUP and PHEI to develop local faculty. IUP training local faculty for teaching in the PHEI is considered as good in the framework as it improves the local content. Developing teachers to assess the student performance for degree award is considered as excellent. This indicates the confidence of IUP in local teachers and willingness to consider them as equals to home campus faculty (Leask, 2004). The policies of a host country focused only on national skills capacity is considered average. This classification is due to the narrow focus on rules, policies and funding strategies (Ramsden, 2008) for improving the economy. Host country policies that facilitate integrated growth of the students, allowing them to



balance personal growth with the development of society is considered good quality. It shows that education policies are responsive to national development goals (Priscariu & Shah, 2016). Policies that encourage innovation and research are considered excellent as they enable development (Pavel, 2012) and the use of higher reasoning abilities of the students and graduates. This achievement demonstrates excellent coordination by policymakers with other stakeholders as noted by Abubakari & Al-hassan, (2016).

Process

Teaching quality, student support, affiliation management, regulatory audits, and community engagement are the five parameters identified in this level. Teaching focusing only on imparting technical and managerial skills is considered average. This approach ignores the learning capacity and ability of the students. Teaching methods that develop practical learning and the ability to manage change are considered as good quality. This requires excellent teacher-student relations and collaborative learning (Henard, 2010). This approach encourages student commitment, participation and equip student's ability to understand and resolve real-life problems (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2007). Higher education that develops a lifelong learning attitude is considered excellent. This shows a faculty responsive to the needs of society and sensitive to the cultural background (Francois, Avoseh, and Griswold, 2016; James, 2008). Student support is an important parameter for ensuring effective learning as it enables students to adjust to the rigours of the offshore programme (Vidalakis, Sun, & Papa, 2013). Ensuring only necessary infrastructure like the library, dormitories, classrooms and communication facilities (Miller-Idriss and Hanauer, 2011) is average as it only ensures the physical requirements. Targeted student support that student difficulties and providing performance feedback is good quality as it retention rates and improve engagement in the learning process (Krcal, Glass and Tremblay, 2014). Student support that imparts long-term planning and positive life skills by developing the arts and



sports abilities (Grinbalt and Kershaw, 2008) is considered excellent. Such support social and community participation of students enables graduates to face life situations optimistically and proactively (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008).

Management of PHEE purely from economic perspectives of enrolment and profit is considered average. This approach ignores the research and social dimensions (IFIC, 2004) of higher education, as the primary concern is survival and profitability (Massy, 2004). PHEI management that strives to enhance the localisation of the offshore programme in terms of curriculum and teacher development is meeting the needs of government, and community stakeholders as noted by Issan (2016) is considered good. A management style that focuses on developing socially responsible students with national identity and values is excellent. Such graduates enable the transformation of society through community projects and lead to sustainable development (Langworthy, 2008). Regulatory audits which merely measure the variance concerning the requirements mandated by the policy and affiliation agreement is considered average. Such evaluation focuses only on accountability assessment to process standards or outcome (Ewell, 2009). Audits that assess the effectiveness of the offshore programme to satisfy the demands of the relevant stakeholders is considered good. Such audits are expected to capture the voices and opinions of marginalised and indirectly engaged stakeholders in the higher education process (Tam, 2001). Audits that contain an assessment of key performance indicators (KPI) (Hanushek, Ruhose and Woessmann, 2015) for evaluating the government strategy of using the offshore programme to improve the quality of higher education is excellent. The KPI for these audits to involve aspects related to national goals, social and cultural objectives and economic imperatives (Carr. et.al, 2005).

Community engagement limited to the industry shows the only inclination for enhancing student skills for professional practice or soliciting opportunities and funding for market-relevant research. Hence such engagements are considered average in this



framework. Undertaking local community projects by the PHEIs provides students with practical learning opportunities (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2014) and hence termed good. These projects also uplift the community through employment generation (Weaver, Robbie, & Borland, 2008) and assimilation of the latest knowledge and best practices in various community undertakings. Cultural festivals under the leadership of PHEIs enable students to immerse in the local norms and values and become sensitive to the needs of the society (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2008). Such experiences have the potential to increase the empathy of students and hence considered excellent in this framework (Gidley et al, 2010).

Product

Higher education outcome in terms of student learning, graduate profile and PHEI reputation is assessed in this category. Assessment of student learning by tracking the demand for graduates (De Weert, 2011) is considered average, as this assessment is solely based on a skills perspective. Higher education that produces change leaders is considered good as it equips students to comprehend complexity and face uncertainty using open learning systems (Todnem, 2005). An education that equips students to compare experiences and insights with reference to positive references and face life optimistically is considered excellent based on Social Inclusion theory framework (Gidley *et al*, 2010). If the graduate profile in their workplaces show interest confining to furthering their career, education quality is considered average. Such focus only on their material wellbeing (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000) and is not motivated to engage with the community. Education that develops entrepreneurship is considered good as it benefits society through employment generation (Weaver, Robbie, & Borland, 2008) and increased standard of living. Higher education that motivates even a small proportion of the students to be a visionary philanthropist who creates wealth and utilises them for the benefit of society and humanity is considered excellent. Higher education institutions that consider only the career advancement of students is



considered average as it ignores the needs and aspirations of the national policymakers and community. Achieving high global ranking by a PHEI is considered a good. High ranking enhances reputation, brings transparency to the capabilities of the PHEI (Rauhvargers, 2011) and increase the confidence of students and employers. When ranking can attract international students to study in the local PHEI, then quality is excellent.

Chapter Conclusion

This Chapter enables to understand the tensions to achieve contradicting objectives of achieving localisation and international quality. It highlights the need to balance the autonomy needs of the offshore programme with regulatory monitoring to assess conformance to national objectives. The quality framework allowed portraying the complex process of an offshore programme that is dynamically influenced by the worldviews, organisation, values, primacies of the multiple stakeholders existing as interdependent entities (Best and Holmes, 2010). Developing the framework brought out the difficulty to establish criteria to measure the framework parameters. Developing criteria for establishing manifestation of these parameters is outside the scope of this study. The next Chapter (Chapter 6) that follows concludes the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This Chapter summarises the key findings that emerged from this study.

Recommendations based on these findings for better implementation of offshore programmes in Oman is provided. This is followed by a review of the limitations of the study and recommendation for future research. The Chapter concludes by detailing the personal development and reflection of the researcher gained by conducting this research study.

Key Findings and Recommendations

This study revealed that all four stakeholders (Top management, Students, Academic staff in PHEIs and Officials in MoHE) have high expectations on the strategy of affiliation with IUPs to improve the quality of higher education in Oman. Stakeholders' expectations and views show an evolving scope to assess the quality of education that is based on student transformation rather than the traditional concept of "fit for purpose" (Tam, 2014). This refocusing has implications on the learning contents and teaching approaches in the offshore programmes. Stakeholders in offshore programmes expect these programmes to provide international standard without diluting the social and cultural values of Oman. The economic compulsions of being a private institution and inherent deficiencies in student intake quality present challenges to offshore programmes for achieving quality student outcomes. The study brought out the challenges to provide autonomy to PHEI for maintaining quality while enforcing the national objectives in terms of skill development, increased access to higher education and sensitising students to social needs. Developing the quality framework provided insight into the difficulties of measuring student outcomes in terms of social



participation and lifelong learning skills. Matrices to develop these indicators can be contested and measuring these parameters can be time-consuming and costly.

The study confirmed the need to utilise the latest educational technologies to deliver the curriculum and improve communication between offshore and inshore students and faculty. Developing research capacity of PHEIs was found to have immense scope for improvement, as the majority of PHEIs faculty were not involved in research activities. The experience of learning from research activity enables faculty to develop better ways of learning and hence improve teaching quality (Brew & Boud, 1995). It is inferred that faculty teaching load is one of the contributing factors leading to lack of development in research activities, though this assumption is not tested in this study. Lack of IUPs attention and unwillingness of PHEIs to invest in facilities required for research might also be a contributing factor. There is also no incentive for PHEIs management to develop research capabilities in the current regulatory environment of Oman. From my experience, I would argue that by linking national research objectives to the PHEIs affiliation agreements and strategies this situation could be rectified. The Role of IUPs may include endorsing their standards to PHEIs research activities and set KPIs to measure the progress and commitment of PHEIs in meeting the research objectives.

The study outcomes highlighted the influence of the economic considerations in stakeholders' decisions on offshore programmes. The government strategy on establishing PHEIs was influenced by financial limitations for establishing and operating more public institutions to meet the increasing demand for higher education (Lamki, 2010). The government decision to impose academic affiliation on all local PHEIs was to develop higher education programmes that meet international standards and to reduce the cost of monitoring quality by local authorities. Student's decision to undertake an offshore course is also driven by a financial perspective. Students in the Middle East, including Oman, are looking for



qualifications from reputed international universities without incurring the financial burden of physically crossing the national border (Knight, 2012). Students view offshore programmes by PHEI as an economically viable alternative for receiving an internationally recognised qualification. PHEIs' management faces many financial constraints when deciding to host offshore programmes. These constraints related to the cost of affiliation with a reputed university, the cost for maintaining quality in offshore programmes, and pressure from investors in PHEI to reduce running cost and maximise profit. Moreover, management of PHEIs has to balance the interests of PHEI investors who seek a good return on investment with the interest of other stakeholders who are looking for higher education programmes with the highest quality standards and lowest cost.

This study also confirmed the need to contextualise offshore programmes to meet the local context as pointed out repeatedly by various authors in different relevant studies (Coleman, 2003; Knight, 2010; Smith, 2010; Wilkins, 2010). While existing studies stressed on the need to pay attention to the local social identity and values when considering offshore programmes; however; this study brought out the need to balance the social identity development with the need to mould Omani students as global citizens. The impact of globalisation is felt more acutely in the daily life of Omani citizens, making it important for developing Omani students to handle the pressures of globalisation positively and with an open mind. This cannot happen if the local education system becomes isolated and captive with one culture. The researcher proposes that government authorities ensure this balance by making provision in the licensing process and stressing this aspect in the early stages of the regulatory reviews of an offshore programme.

Implications for Professional Practice

This study is undertaken by the researcher based on her professional practice in order to improve the current status quo of offshore programmes affiliation in Oman. The researcher is working in MoHE for the last 19 years and has gained extensive experience dealing with different academic affiliation agreements of PHEIs in Oman. The current bylaws followed by MoHE required all PHEIs to collaborate with international partners to improve the local higher education system. Without a doubt, these bylaws proved to be effective and add value to the local education system. The overall positive perception of different local higher education stakeholders examined in this study endorsed the effectiveness of affiliation in raising the quality of teaching in Omani PHEIs. The small study sample of three PHEIs in this study might pose some limitations in generalising the outcomes to other PHEIs. However; this study has provided useful indications for the future development of different aspects of collaboration between PHEI and IUP. There is a continuous debate on the extent to which IUPs fulfil their commitments to raise quality offshore programme by PHEIs in Oman. While there is no comprehensive and systematic study undertaken to provide a clear answer, the findings and discussion of this study give an encouraging indication about the fulfilment of commitments and obligation by affiliate partners.

When considering best affiliation models in assuring quality, this study showed that all forms of affiliations are suitable, and there is no direct correlation between the type of affiliation and the targeted quality of teaching. Each model has its strengths and weakness but remains suitable if minor amendments are added. Castle and Kelly (2004) suggested partnerships models that are less “colonial”, as these models help in building local expertise in programme developments and allow the hosting institution to take wider roles in managing its internal quality system (Castle & Kelly, 2004). Based on these findings, the researcher suggests that more stringent affiliation models such as Franchised, Branch and Validation be



established at the beginning of PHEIs development. After a certain period of establishment, the offshore programme can move to less stringent models such as twining, joint degree, and highly articulated programmes models. The time needed to move from one model to another could be based on graduating at least two or three cohorts from the current scheme and obtaining "institutional accreditation" from OAAA to ensure that the local institution is capable of running its programmes with minor intervention from the IUPs. Implementing this approach will help to build confidence in local PHEIs with great supervision from the local authorities and IUPs.

On a personal level, conducting this study has increased the researcher's ability to solicit and incorporate perspective from all connected stakeholders on an issue and propose resolutions that balance the interest of stakeholders. This capability has advanced the researcher's critical views and emotional intelligence. The study also created tensions for the researcher due to undertaking different data collection activities that required significant coordination abilities and handling participants of varying stature and maturity. Undertaking these endeavours has increased researcher's confidence and ability to handle situations involving conflicting demands maturely.

Undertaking data analysis of different nature and characteristics using methods and techniques in which the researcher had no prior experience has increased the ability for sensemaking of novel and unique situations in a scholarly manner. Exposure to the research discipline, standards, and reflexive techniques has enabled the researcher to develop and maintain a distance from the issues handled in professional practice. This competence has improved the emotional maturity by enabling examination of issues from an elevated perspective and reducing biases in judging the situations. The variation and conflicts between the perspective of the participants in the study made the researcher aware of the confounding complexity underlying in an existing process. This understanding has instilled clarity of



thought and motivation to pursue the in-depth inquiry of scholastic rigour and resist the temptation to apply tacit sensemaking. The ethics considerations and restrictions inculcated during the research has made the researcher more sensitive to the needs and rights of colleagues and other stakeholders in the workplace. In summary, the study has enabled the researcher to become more confident, deliberate, empathic and composed in attitude, approach, and disposition.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the scope of identifying the perceived role of IUPs in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes. The findings of this study can be applied where a host country uses offshore programmes for the advancement of higher education. The small sample size is a major constraint in this research as it is too small in the context of the research problem being investigated. However; this factor has limited impact on the current study as the selected population is well justified due to the limited student/staff population in the postgraduate programmes in Oman. Another limitation of this research is the exclusion of foreign university representatives from participating in this study as the study focuses only on examining the perception of local stakeholders. None of the members from the international academic partners are taking part in this study. This shortfall is because the partnering international universities associated with this study are located in different continents (two partners are located in Europe and one in Asia). The cost, logistical and administrative constraints for arranging interaction with the relevant personnel in these institutions prevented their participation in this study. Another limitation revealed in this research is the application of the theoretical framework. Social Inclusion theory was applicable to the Omani context since building human potential and maintaining social and cultural values are of great importance to the Omani government. This theory might not be



applicable in other mature and developed higher education contexts where students' social empowerment and cultural values are not part of their national objectives.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study could be extended to include the perspectives of the foreign partner, which is currently not incorporated in this study. This study has identified major factors which are important for the education quality in the higher education of Oman. A quantitative study of these factors to assess the importance or weight of these factors towards causation of education quality may be conducted. The study indicates the localisation of content and expertise for higher education as an important objective of the authorities. The knowledge generated from this study may be used to generate innovative theoretical questions and testable hypothesis that can contribute to understanding the link between localisation and collaboration of local partners. There is sparse existing knowledge about how poor communication skills of teachers in higher education in Oman, though this is a prevalent and important issue affecting teaching quality. Studies framing and testing propositions to diffuse knowledge from existing communication literature to mitigate the communication deficiencies of the faculty may also be conducted. Also, longitudinal studies may be done to understand the development and improvement of learning content in the local PHEI of Oman under the affiliation programme. Also, a study on the added value of the affiliation to the local economy might be conducted to explore the broad impact of internationalisation in the economy of the developing countries.



Conclusion

The outcomes of this study have brought out the expectations, status, and areas requiring improvement with respect to the offshore programmes conducted in Oman. The discussion enables readers to understand the underlying complexities and causes that explain the important issues highlighted in study findings. The quality framework proposed enables practitioners to understand and assess the quality of higher education through an offshore programme in a comprehensive manner by accommodating all stakeholder interests. Bringing out the limitations of the study and recommending areas for future research enables future practitioners to apply the study findings in similar contexts and researchers to extend knowledge on the subject area. The researcher was transformed by the process of undertaking the study by becoming a better leader, problem framer & investigator, empathetic team player and a strategist matured by reflexive practice.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: MoHE Approval letter

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Higher Education



سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التعليم العالي

Date: 22 May 2017

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Ms. Jokha Abdullah Al Shikaili, who is working in this Ministry, is enrolled in the Doctor of Education (EdD) Programme at the University of Liverpool in partnership with Laureate Education. Ms. Jokha is currently undergoing her final research thesis titled: "The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programs: A study of Omani PHEIs". The main objective of her research is to explore the perception of different Omani stakeholders on the role of international partners in fulfilling their responsibilities in promoting quality standards in Omani higher education. In addition, she is seeking to explore the added value of the international partners and their contribution to the quality of the local system and to suggest some improvements in the current policies and regulations pertaining academic affiliation's roles and responsibilities in the Omani context. In order to fulfill the requirements of her research she kindly requests permission to conduct site visits to your respected organization to interview management, academic faculty and students using different research tools such as interviews, semi structured questionnaires and focus group discussion that serves the objectives of her research.

The researcher will provide you with the required information and consent forms to keep her research project and data collection in line with the highest standards of research ethics and privacy as well as meeting your organisation's policies in this regards.

Your support is highly appreciated. For further information you may contact the researcher through the following contact details:

Ms. Jokha Al Shikaili
Mobile: +968 99470699
P.O Box 82, PC 112 Rowi, Sultanate of Oman
Email: jokha.al-shikaili@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Also should you require more details about the researcher or this study, please contact Dr.Ming Cheng, the student's academic supervisor; through the following details:

Dr.Ming Cheng
Email: ming.cheng@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Thanking you in advance for your professional support.

Sincerely Yours,



Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Surmi, PhD
Undersecretary of Higher Education
Ministry of Higher Education



نحنو تعليم عالٍ ذي جودة عالية يلبي متطلبات التنمية المستدامة

سلطنة عُمان، ص.ب.: ٨٢ روي - الرمز البريدي: ١١٢ - هاتف ٢٤٣٤٠٤٦٤ / فاكس ٢٤٣٤٠٤٦٢
Sultanate of Oman, P.O.Box: 82 Rowi, P.C.112, Tel: 24340464 / Fax 24340462 www.mohe.gov.om

**Appendix 2: VPREC Ethics Approval**

Dear Jokha Al-Shikaili		
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.		
Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:	Expedited	
School:	Lifelong Learning	
Title:	The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programs: A study of Omani Private Higher Education Institutions”	
First Reviewer:	Prof. Dr. Morag A. Gray	
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Alla Korzh	
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Lucilla Crosta, Dr. Rita Kop, Dr. Mary Johnson	
Date of Approval:	27 th September 2017	
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:		
Conditions		
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.
<p>This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc.</p> <p>Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher’s behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).</p>		
Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.		

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta Chair, EdD. VPREC



Appendix 3: Participants Information Sheet (Sample)

Dear Participant,

My name is **Jokha Al Shikaili**, I am undertaking a comprehensive thesis project as a doctoral student in the University of Liverpool. My thesis titled “**The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes: A study of Omani Private Higher Education Institutions**”. This project will provide me an opportunity to reflect on critical issues that I encounter in the context of my work, apply my scholarly learning to these issues, and, in the end, develop as an agent of positive change in my organisation.

You are kindly invited to participate in my research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, relatives and GP if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

1. Research Purpose

The main purpose of my research is to explore the perception of different Omani stakeholders on the role of international partners in fulfilling their responsibilities in promoting quality standards in Omani higher education. In addition, I am seeking to explore the added value of the international partners and their contribution to the quality of the local system and to suggest some improvements in the current policies and regulations pertaining academic affiliation's roles and responsibilities in the Omani context. In order to fulfil the requirements of my research I kindly need your support and feedback to be able to answer my main research questions which are:

1. What are the main elements perceived by Omani stakeholders as vital to assure the quality of teaching in offshore programmes – (i.e., local management and faculty perceptions)?
2. What are the Omani stakeholders' perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching at the Omani Private Higher Education Institutions?
3. To what extent are the international university partners perceived to be fulfilling their responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programmes at the local Private Higher Education Institutions (management and faculty perspectives)?
4. What are the key policies/regulations that require amendments/revision to ensure better implementation of offshore programmes in the Omani context (MoHE and local management)?

To meet my obligations in this research, I will provide you with the required information and consent forms to keep my research project and data collection in line with the highest standards of research ethics and privacy as well as meeting your organisation's policies in this regard.

2. Why you have been chosen to take part?

You have been invited as a potential participant in this study due to the following reasons:

1) You are from a Private institution that award foreign degrees under one of the following type of affiliations:

- Franchised
- Validation
- Branch campus



2) You represent one of the following groups:

- Top Management (Dean)
- Middle Management (Head of postgraduate studies)
- Learning facilitators (i.e Academic staff who are directly involved in teaching and learning process)
- Learners (students who are the centre of teaching and learning process)
- Senior staff in the Ministry of Higher Education (my workplace)

3) Other criteria:

1. You are active staff/students in the selected private higher education institutions or MoHE at the time of collecting data.
2. You are an MBA staff or student from the selected institutions
3. You are capable/mentally stable and a healthy participant.

3. Do you have to take part?

No, your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw or postpone your participation at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

4. What will happen if you take part?

Through this research, you will be engaged in various data collection methods including quantitative and qualitative, primary data and secondary data. Some potential sources of primary data include interviews, surveys and focus group discussion. To support the research plans, the researcher may also collect and analyse documents of organisational policies, practices, and programmes (such as affiliation agreements with foreign partners, programme quality manuals, external quality visit reports, staff development policies, and any other related information) within the selected Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman in order to determine how foreign partners assure the quality of teaching of offshore programmes in these local institutions.

So, if you are taking part of this research you will be approached to conduct one of the following:

- a) **Face to face interview:** this interview will be conducted if you are part of the management team (deans and head of departments) in your organisation. It will be held in your free time and will take place either in your workplace or any other venue you find it more appropriate-The interview will be scheduled a head (minimum of one week before the meeting take place). This should take no longer than one hour unless the time permits for longer time and by your consent. Audio recording will be used to facilitate note taking with your permission, data confirmation and future references.
- b) **Electronic Semi-structure questionnaire:** the questionnaire will be distributed electronically to you if you are part of the academic staff. This questionnaire can be filled in any secured PC/Laptop available with you and should take no longer than 30 minutes from your personal time. All necessary information in relation to questionnaire arrangements will be sent to you a head of time through necessary communication channels.
- c) **Focus group discussion (FGD):** This discussion will be conducted with postgraduate students in one of the selected institutions. This FGD should take place in students' free time and in a place that they agree upon. This discussion should take no longer than two hours and for one time only during this study. All group discussions and after your permission will be recorded to facilitate note taking, data confirmation and future references. Students will be asked to sign a confidentiality protocol or agreement on keeping all discussion within the group as top confidential.



In all mentioned above data collection procedures, the researcher is responsible to obtain all required approvals from your organisation prior your participation in the event.

5. Expenses and / or payments

There is no expenses/or payments expected from your participation in this research.

6. Are there any risks in taking part?

A minimal risk is expected for participants by taking part in this research. This risk might occur mainly with the potential academic staff participating in the study as they might feel threatened by their management in case of declaring data that might underestimate or affect the reputation of their institutions. However; this is rarely could happened in a professional organisation like higher education institutions since HEIs are widely exposed to external evaluation and assessment for different purposes (such as external quality assessment/audits, institutional accreditation, national surveys and etc..). In order to minimise this risk, I need to get full assurance from the top management of each institutions that any participant in this study will be secured and there will be no consequences/risks of whatsoever against them. Also, all identities, personal information and feedback will be totally secured, anonymised and encrypted so no one can access the data other than the researcher (please read the following section on privacy and confidentiality to address all details in this regards).

Student might also encounter minimal risk of having their feedback disclosed by their colleagues who are participating in the focus group discussion, although this is unexpected from mature students, however; I will try to minimise this by signing an individual confidentially agreement with all students. Having said that, should any participant experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of this research please declare that to the researcher immediately or he/she can withdraw from this study at any point of time without being affected.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There are many benefits expected by taking part in this study. Each participant group will benefit differently from the results of this study. Following are the expected benefit for each group:

Top management: They will be in a better position to shape up their relationship with the affiliate partners. Understanding the role of affiliates in assuring the quality of their institutions will help them in improving the contractual obligations of their partners. Also, since this research will examine three type of affiliations in three different institutions, this will lend the top management in each institutions a wide scope of views that can be utilised for future improvements.

Head of departments and academic staff: Since these groups are the key players in the quality of teaching in any HE, so they will benefit from the wide range of views from different stakeholders in making their relation with the affiliates better and improve the instruments of evaluating the deliverables of affiliates in teaching and learning. Also, they will be in a better position to give better recommendation on the way forward of future affiliations.

Students: Students represents the final product of teaching and learning process, so understanding the impact of academic affiliation on their overall learning experience will benefit them on improving the quality of education they are receiving from the local partner.

8. What if you are unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me through the details mentioned below and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you should contact my supervisor Dr. Ming Cheng at ming.cheng@online.liverpool.ac.uk If you are still unhappy you can contact the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool: liverpooethics@ohcampus.com.



When contacting the Research Participant Advocate please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

9. Ethical Concerns:

a. Permission Granted

Before conducting any research activities in your respected organization, I am required to complete an ethical approval process obtained at the University of Liverpool prior to scheduling the interview and collecting organisational documents.

b. Privacy and Confidentiality

All the information you will share in this research will be confidential and used for the purposes of this study only. The data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act and will be collected in the researcher password protected PCs. In all cases, institution information will be anonymised, no proprietary information and your identity will be shared, and your privacy as interviewee will be safeguarded. Additionally, no results of the research will be made publically available without specific approval from you and your organisation. Data will be stored for at least 5 years with adequate provisions to maintain confidentiality since data once collected will be anonymised, encrypted and saved in a safe place with a password. Also all private/personal information will be destroyed immediately when the research is over. If the research procedures might reveal criminal or unethical activity that necessitates a duty to report, then the researcher will follow appropriate ethical procedures in keeping with the organisation's regulations. Individual participant research data, such questionnaires/interviews/samples/ will be made anonymous and given a research code, known only to the researcher. A master list identifying participants to the research codes data will be held on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher and deleted when data collection will be over. Hard paper/taped data will be stored in saved lockers and electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer (with anti-virus application) known only by researcher. In addition to that an external storage drive with excellent storage capacity will be used as a back-up and this will be stored in a personal locker (water and fire proof) with password.

c. Potential Conflicts of Interest

Data collected in this research should only be used to serve the purpose of this study, as a researcher I should avoid any conflict might occurs by being in authoritative role and you have the right to withdraw or inform the research participant advocate (details mentioned below) if any conflict is witnessed before or after your participation. Indeed, my role as a researcher here is separated from my professional one and please be rest assured that you will not be affected with whatsoever by being part of this research. However, should you feel unsecured due to my position in the Ministry of Higher Education, please feel free to withdraw from this research at any point of time and you bear with no consequences by doing so.

Contact Details:

- **Researcher contact details are:**
Ms. Jokha Al Shikaili
Ministry of Higher Education, Oman
Phone (office): +968 24340379
Personal Mobile: +968 99470699
P.O Box 82, PC 112 Ruwi
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Email: jokha.al-shikaili@online.liverpool.ac.uk



The contact details of the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool are:

-
Email address liverpooethics@ohcampus.com

Please keep/print a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for your reference. Please contact me and/or the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool with any question or concerns you may have.

Jokha Al Shikaili

1st January 2018

Jokha

Researcher

Date

Signature



Appendix 4: Participants Consent Form (Sample)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: "The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programs: A study of Omani Private Higher Education Institutions"

Researcher: Jokha Al Shikaili

**Please
initial box**

- 1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [01.01.2018] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
- 3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.
- 4. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.
- 5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for note proofing, data confirmation and future references.
- 6. I understand that I must not take part in this research if I encounter any risk or a disadvantage.
- 7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research.
- 8. I understand that my personal identity will be kept strictly confidential.
- 9. I understand and agree that once I submit my data it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.
- 10. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
Jokha Al Shikaili Researcher	01.01.2018 Date	Signature

**Appendix 5: PHEIs Authorization Letter (Sample)**

Jokha Al-Shikaili <jokha.al-shikaili@online.liverpool.ac.uk>

Thu, May 25, 2017 at 4:37 PM

To: *****

Dear Dr.*****,

I Jokha Al Shikaili, am enrolled in the Doctor of Education (EdD) Programme at the University of Liverpool. I entered the programme in order to develop doctoral-level depth of knowledge and research skills across areas in higher education such as higher education management, innovative approaches to educational leadership, decision making, as well as ethics, social responsibility, and social change. As an EdD student I am required to undertake a research study as part of my thesis in this programme. My thesis will focus on “The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes: A study of Omani PHEIs”. This research will provide me an opportunity to reflect on critical issues that I encounter in the context of my work, apply my scholarly learning to these issues, and, in the end, develop as an agent of positive change in my organisation.

In the context of my research in the EdD programme, and as part of the University of Liverpool ethical process, I hereby request an authorisation to access organisational data, facility use, and use of personnel time for research purposes relevant to my required assignments. This includes permission to access documents from the archives of the organisation which are not necessarily in the public domain and which I may normally have access to when performing the responsibilities of my job. This also includes authorisation to conduct a set of interviews with the organisation’s management, academic staff and students in the area relevant to my research. I also request permission to provide my personal reflections on the collected data. I have included with this letter a Participant Information Sheet which outlines in greater detail the nature of the current research study which I am required to complete for this programme. Also, a letter from my organisation is attached to support my request.

I appreciate the opportunity to engage in research involving your organisation. Please contact me and/or the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool with any question or concerns you may have.

My contact details are:

Jokha Al Shikaili

Ministry of Higher Education, Oman

Phone (office): +968 24340370/Personal Mobile: +968 99470699

Email: jokha.al-shikaili@online.liverpool.ac.uk

The contact details of the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool are:

001-612-312-1210 (USA number)

Email address liverpooethics@ohecampus.com

Looking forward to your kind support and appreciate receiving your response in this regard at your earliest.

With best regards,

Jokha Al Shikaili

2 attachments

 MoHE support letter-Jokha.pdf
61K

 UoL EdD _Participant Information Sheet-Jokha.pdf
410K

**Appendix 6: Interview Questions (Sample)*****Sample (1): Focus group questions*****Part (1): General info**

- a. Group characteristics:
- 1) Name of the institution:
 - a. Institution (A)
 - b. Institution (B)
 - c. Institution (C)
 - 2) Name of the programme:
 - 3) Year of study:
 - a. Year (1)
 - b. Year (2)
 - 4) Mode of study:
 - a. Full time
 - b. Part time
 - 5) Type of programme affiliation:
 - a. Franchised Programme
 - b. Validation Programme
 - C. Branch

Part (2): Please answer the following questions, each question will take 3-5 minutes:

- From your perspective, what are the main elements of effective teaching in postgraduate programmes? Do you see these elements exist in your current hosted programme?
- What are the most important motives for you to join this offshore programme?
- Is the role of your affiliate partner clear for you? Does this role meets your expectations? how?
- What is/ are the added value/s of having an affiliate partner in your programme?
- How do your local teachers encourage you to become good learners? Give some examples.
- What do you think of the current learning support given by your local institution/teacher? why?
- Do you see your current teachers capable in delivering the programme? what are the area for improvements in this sense?
- Is there any visiting professors coming from your academic partner ? how you compare their teaching strategies in comparison of your local teachers?
- Do you expect more responsibilities to be handled by the affiliate partners? If yes, give me some examples?
- How your institution can make your experience in this type of programmes better?

*******End of the Interview*******

Sample (2): Management interview questions**Part (1): General info (5 minutes)**

1. Name of the institution:
 - a. Institution (A)
 - b. Institution (B)
 - c. Institution (C)
2. Position: _____
3. Total years of experience in HEIs in general _____
4. Total years of experience in leading/supervising offshore programmes _____
5. What is your main leadership role in supervising offshore programmes _____
6. What kind of academic affiliation do you have for your postgraduate programmes: (Franchised
2) Validation 3) Branch campus 4) others)



Part (2): Please answer the following questions, each question will take 3-5 minutes-total of 45 minutes:

- How do you understand quality of teaching in offshore programmes?
- What are the main items mentioned in your affiliation agreement that spell out the role of your partner in assuring the quality of teaching in your institution?
- What are the most important elements that you consider more crucial in teaching postgraduate programmes? Are these elements covered by your academic partner?
- To what extent has the international university partner fulfilled its responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programmes in your institution?
- What is the role of your partner in building the capacity of your local academic staff, please give some examples of training/exchange programmes used to enhance the professional capacity of your lecturers?
- Are you satisfied with the contribution of your partner in assuring the quality of teaching in your programmes? What are your suggestions for improvement?
- Do you expect more responsibilities to be handled by your partner? Give some examples.
- Do you think the current affiliation model works well in your institution or not, why?
- Do you think MoHE gives enough flexibility to implement offshore programmes in Oman?
- How can MoHE improve its current regulatory system to give enough flexibility for implementing offshore programmes?

*******End of the Interview*******

Sample (3): MoHE interview questions

- From your opinion, what are the benefits of offering offshore programmes in PHEIs in Oman?
- Who should take the leading role in assuring the quality of offshore programmes (local institutions or foreign partner)? Why?
- How could the development of offshore programmes enhance the quality of teaching in the Omani context?
- What are the keys to effective collaboration between local PHEIs and its academic affiliated partner?
- How could the current bylaws help define the role of each partner?
- What could we do to make the current role of the affiliated partners more effective in boosting the quality of teaching in the offshore programmes?
- What would you suggest to the Ministry in order to improve the current system to ensure the quality of teaching is well delivered and students obtained the right qualification?



Sample (4): Faculty Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

My name is Jokha Al Shikaili and I am undertaking a comprehensive thesis project for my doctorate programme in the University of Liverpool, UK. My thesis titled "***The perceived role of the international university partners in assuring the quality of teaching in offshore programmes: A study of Omani Private Higher Education Institutions***". The main objective of this study is to explore different stakeholders' insights/perceptions on the contribution of the international academic partners in building a robust teaching quality system in the local Private Higher Institutions (PHEIs).

Since you are an active stakeholder in higher education and you are playing a crucial part in the quality of teaching in your institution, thus your participation in this study is vital and you are kindly invited to take part by responding to the following questionnaire. All the information you will share in this research will be treated as confidential and used for the purposes of this study only. The data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act where high level of data security is maintained. Your institution information will be anonymised and your privacy as respondent will be safeguarded.

In the following questionnaire you will be exposed to the following terms that have the relevant meaning mentioned underneath:

Offshore programmes: *Higher Education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. It encompasses a wide range of modalities in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms from students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to distance learning (using a range of technologies and including e-learning) (UNESCO/OECD, 2005 p.9).*

Academic university partner or affiliate partner: An international or foreign university that sign an affiliation agreement with a local HE institution to provide its own programmes and award its own degrees for the local students. Normally this Affiliation Agreements defines clearly the role of the international university (External provider) and the Local university/college (hosted institution) in different quality aspect for the sake of successful delivery of the programme to local entrants. Academic affiliation takes different forms/modes; in this study and the author is examining the following forms of affiliations:

Franchising: *When learning programmes designed by the foreign provider (franchiser) and delivered in the domestic institution (franchisee). The Student receives the qualification of the franchiser institution. Variations range from "full" to "part" franchise (Alleyne, V, 2012 cited by Trevor-Roper et al ,2013-pg 4,5).*

Validation: *When academic programme established in a local higher education institution as equivalent to its own, leading to the award of a qualification from the latter (sending country) (Alleyne, V, 2012 cited by Trevor-Roper et al ,2013-pg 4,5).*

Branch Campus: *When Foreign institution establishes a subsidiary, either on its own or jointly with a local provider, and delivery is entirely by the foreign university, leading to a degree from the latter (Alleyne, V, 2012 cited by Trevor-Roper et al ,2013-pg 4,5)*

The expected time to fill this questionnaire is 15-20 minutes.

If you have any inquiries about any question in this questionnaire, please contact me on my mobile: +968 99470699

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and your contribution is highly appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Jokha Al Shikaili

References:

-Trevor-Roper, S., Razvi, S. & Goodliffe, T. (2013). Academic Affiliations between foreign and Omani HEIs: *Learning from OAAA Quality Audit*. Paper presented at the 2013 Biennial International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQA/AHE) Conference, Taipei, Taiwan, 8-11 April 2013.

-UNESCO/OECD (2005) Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education Provision
<http://www.oecd.org/education/educationeconomyandsociety/35779480.pdf>



1. Institution Name:

2. Your current position?

- Full time lecturer
- Part time lecturer
- Other (please specify)

3. Total number of years teaching in HEIs?

- Less than 5 yrs
- 5-10 yrs
- 10-15 yrs
- 15-20yrs
- 20 yrs and above

4. Total number of years working at your present institution?

- Less than 5
- 5-10 yrs
- 10-15yrs
- 15 yrs and above

Other (please specify)

5. Affiliate University Name? (specifically for postgraduate programmes?)

6. What kind of academic affiliation model do you have for your postgraduate programmes?

- Franchised
- Validation



Branch Campus

7. Do you think this model works well in your institution?

- Extremely Well
- Very complicated
- Good but required some improvements
- Not good at all

8. How do you understand the quality of teaching in offshore programmes -in brief?

9. From your perspective; who should play a greater role in managing the quality of teaching in offshore programmes?

- Partner University should be the sole player in the quality of teaching of offshore programmes
- Local institution should be the sole player in the quality of teaching of offshore programmes
- Both Local and Partner institutions in cooperation should be the main players
- Neutral

Other (please specify)

10. From your perspective; to what extent has the affiliate partner university fulfilled its responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching in your institution?

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- Not at all
- Neutral



11. From your perspective; which of the following do you consider the key elements to the quality of offshore programmes? Please choose the most applicable elements to you

- Quality of programme management via Partner University
- Quality of programme management via Local Institution
- Quality of programme management via both Local Institution and Partner University
- Quality of teachers who teach the courses
- Quality of Students enrolled in the programme
- Quality of programme curriculums
- Quality of local facilities (i.e library, learning resources, class rooms..etc)

Other (please specify)

12. What kind of teaching support are you getting from your affiliate partner? Please mention top three types of support you are experiencing, and you find them extremely useful in improving the quality of your teaching?

13. Are you satisfied with the amount of teaching support you are getting as a teacher from your affiliate partner?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

14. The partner university provides local academic staff with detailed manuals and guidelines on how the course should be taught and delivered

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree



Strongly Agree

15. The teachers in my institution have access to the teaching materials that support programme delivery

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

16. Academic staff in my institution are highly involved in curriculum development of offshore programme

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

17. The curriculum and the teaching materials in offshore programmes are relevant to the Omani context

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

18. I believe that the teaching standards of offshore programmes in Oman is almost similar to the teaching standards in our partner university

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree



- Agree
- Strongly Agree

19. The partner university provides enough training support to local academic staff in order to deliver the programme in highest standards

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

20. Which of the following issues can be seen as major challenge/s in teaching offshore programmes in your institution? Please choose the most applicable item/s to you

- Local lecturers are unqualified
- Lack of communication between affiliate partner and local academic staff in course improvement matters
- Unclear role of local academic staff in course design and course development
- Lack of learning resources that support learning
- Poor quality of learners
- Poor teaching/learning facilities in the local institution (e.g classrooms, library, video/audio materials, self study rooms, labs...etc)
- Local students are not ready to study such type of programmes
- Poor support from local management when extra-curriculum activities are required
- Others (please specify)

Other (please specify)



21. How effective is the training you have received from your affiliate partner?

- Extremely effective
- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not so effective
- Not at all effective
- No training available for local staff

22. How often do you meet with your affiliate partner representatives to discuss your views on different teaching matters?

- Almost never
- Once or twice per year
- Every few months
- Monthly
- Weekly or more

23. Who is responsible for your teaching assessment (lecturers' performance appraisal) in offshore programmes?

- Local institution
- Affiliate university
- Both local and affiliate

24. In what way your teaching performance is assessed? Please choose among the following assessment approaches.

- Teaching is assessed through classroom observations by peers, principals or external evaluators
- Teaching is assessed through overall students' achievements (i.e Final Grads).
- Teaching is assessed through student ratings



- Teaching is assessed through principal (or department head) judgment
- Teaching is assessed through teacher self-reports
- Teaching is assessed through analysis of classroom artefacts and teacher portfolios

Other (please specify)

25. From your perspective, what are the main components of effective teaching? Please rank the following component as seen important to you where (1) is highly important and (5) is less important:

Content knowledge

Quality of instruction

Classroom climate

Classroom management

Teacher beliefs

Professional behaviors



29. Do you expect more responsibilities to be handled by your academic partner? Give some examples please.

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 7: Data Analysis Process

Data Analysis Process using Braun and Clark, 2006

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarization with data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Transcribing all the data from the interviews 2) Purposive reading of the collected data 3) Taking notes in memos while reading and rereading the data
Generation of initial codes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4) Highlighting interesting feature across the entire data set 5) Topical and analytical coding undertaken to generate categories 6) Interrogating data to find patterns due to frequency, resemblance, variance, causality and order 7) Identifying the emergence outlines and categories
Searching for themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8) Categories were grouped upon repetitions across different qualitative data to identify main themes emerged from categorise 9) Analysis of themes to enable identify meanings from data
Reviewing themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10) Identification of sub-themes under each main theme for the three stakeholder categories, i.e., officials of MoHE, top management and students of PHEI.
Defining and naming themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11) Ideas generated from the data was reviewed inductively and synthesised with insights from existing knowledge and researcher experience to find answers to the main research questions studied 12) Identification of sub-themes under each main theme for the three stakeholder categories, i.e., officials of MoHE, top management and students of PHEI.
Producing the report	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13) Making sense of the themes and sub-themes to provides a general explanation of the data and extract examples from the transcribed interviews and create vivid relation between main themes and sub-themes. 14) Main themes were created in relevance to the main research questions to ensure proper link of the research questions, literature, theoretical framework and data extracted from qualitative and quantitative data. 15) Producing a report of the analysis in chapter 4 (Research Findings).



Appendix 8: Transcribed Interview Samples

Management interviewee # 5

Interview duration: 45 minutes

Interviewer: Thank you so much for giving me some of your valuable time to conduct this interview, it is highly appreciated. Just to ensure that I have followed all the required ethical process prior to starting, have you received earlier the research Participation Information Sheet?

Interviewee: Oh yes thank you. I also signed the consent, so I am ready.

Interviewer Q1: Oh that's great, ok to begin with, how do you understand the quality of teaching in offshore programmes?

Interviewee: Well, in my opinion, there are many ways to understand the quality of teaching in general. Whatever we meant by quality of teaching its always applicable to both local and offshore programmes. So, it could be the teaching methods, the quality of instructions given to students by the lecturers, programme content, teaching support...etc. I can say that the first indicator of the quality of teaching can is the assessment of students learning outcomes and to ensure that these outcomes are in line with the prescribed in each course/module and for the whole programme. In addition to that providing all students with needed academic support whether from faculty or the institution by itself. In offshore programmes, the same concept can be applied.

Interviewer Q2: Ok so you think that the quality of teaching elements are the same for local programmes and offshore programmes?

Interviewee: Yes, to certain extent. However; there are other factors that might impact the quality of teaching in offshore programmes, and from my humble views, the main factor is the way that these programmes are managed and controlled to ensure that our local student is given an overall learning experience that is in par of that given to other students in the main campus.

Interviewer Q3: What are the main items mentioned in your affiliation agreement that spell out the role of your partner in assuring the quality of teaching in your institution?

Interviewee: I might not be able to remember all of them, but I can give you a copy of the affiliation agreement that spells out in details the role of our affiliate in assuring the offshore programmes delivered in Oman.

Overall, I can give you some examples that come straight to my head. As you know that we are the only branch campus in the country and being a campus that means we should follow similar academic rules and regulations that are applied to the main campus. In term of programmes content, it has to be the same as the branch with limited space for modifications from our branch. Students assessment, programme outline, entry requirements, academic regulation, delivery of the course all have to follow exactly the main campus policies and regulations. Anyway, I will give you a copy of the scope of our relation so you can understand how our relationship with our partner works.

Interviewer Q4: What are the most important elements that you consider more crucial in teaching postgraduate programmes? Are these elements covered by your academic partner?

Interviewee: Ok... again there are many. Some good examples of these elements that I personally consider them important to be instilled in any postgraduate programmes include independent thinking, critical thinking, enquiry, and the ability to analyse and develop new knowledge based on research. The designed and delivery of our postgraduate courses reflect in general these elements and there is close supervision form the partner



institution which is done every semester through external panels to ensure that both the assessments and assignments that are given to the students in Oman are in line with learning outcomes for every course in the main campus. However; lecturers who can support independent learning and who can really push students to make them work very hard, in my opinion, play a greater role in ensuring that these elements are well acquired by students.

Interviewer Q5: ok from your perspective, to what extent has the international university partner fulfilled its responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programmes in your institution?

Interviewee: I believe that our partner not only very keen but precise and meticulous in ensuring that all items of the agreement are done properly, and they are reviewed. There is a strong and periodic communication between the partner institution and the branch which deals with this relationship. So broadly I can say our main campus is in full control of different processes and practices occurred here in the branch. They conduct periodic visits to ensure that we follow-by book- all main campus polices and procedures. So, they are highly committed in this side and very demanding I would say. Also specific about ensuring all the teaching and assessments are done according to the agreement.

Interviewer Q6: So I would say that you are satisfied in general with their current role?

Interviewee: Yes, they are very committed not only to satisfy our mutual relationship but also to maintain the quality of their deliverables which also assessed by other external accreditation agencies. The main campus manages around four other branches in different Arab countries, so failing to monitor the quality of any branch will affect badly their reputation thus the overall quality of the headquarter campus.

Interviewer Q7: What is the role of your partner in building the capacity of your local academic staff, please give some examples of training/exchange programmes used to enhance the professional capacity of your lecturers?

Interviewee: I like this question as its pinpoint one of our current challenges in managing offshore programmes. Our current agreement focused much on our academic relation. There are some indications in the agreement which refer to building capacity of our local academic staff. There have been occasions in which there were presentations or workshop conducted by our partner staff. They are either held face to face at the branch here in Oman or sometimes through video conferencing. There are some examples of that, but probably in my views, this is an area that has to be further developed and utilized. We have our own scheme of professional development which is done at the branch level.

Interviewer Q8: AHH, so if I may ask what are the main areas for improvements in this aspect?! I mean building the capacity of your academic staff?

Interviewee: I wish to extend our current relation to have our local staff become more engaged in teaching assignments in the main campus. Currently, as I mentioned earlier, our partner sends some of their senior staff in our branch to conduct 2 to 3 days of training (mostly theoretical) and in some occasions, they attend some of the faculty classes and give some feedback. However; I think our staff need to be engaged more in teaching courses on the main campus which extend to one semester at least. Having this exposure in no doubt will enrich their teaching capacity. Also, our staff are not involved at all in any course development activities, this from my opinion affects the sense of ownership and they felt that they are teaching contents that are not belongs to them. The programme has to be in line with local needs and cultural values using case studies, scenarios, examples, and stories related to students' context and this make learning more relevant. If the teacher is dis-attached from the main programme content this definitely affects the way they teach and deliver the programmes and dilute programme localization and its relevancy to the context and local market needs.

Interviewer Q9: Are you satisfied with the contribution of your partner in assuring the quality of teaching in your programmes? What are your suggestions for improvement?



Interviewee: My quick answer for this is yes, I am happy with the support from the affiliated university. However, I wish if the main campus gives us more freedom to develop and design our new courses and guide student activities. This area, in general, needs further enhancement. Most of the emphasize in the agreement is in making sure that we use the exact modules of the programme, and we follow their assessments and review guides. Also, they put a lot of emphasis on how we confer the awards without compromising their standards. The quality of teaching that includes staff selection, student selection, teaching methods and learning environment are. Although the main campus management is highly committed to assuring the quality of the overall programme but they do not give the local branch enough feedback on how to improve. They are in charge of programme review and they send external panels to evaluate the programme, however; very little feedback comes after these visits. We feel that they are very stringent in term of ensuring proper implementation of their academic regulations and processes and this is good but to the contrary they should help the local branch to flourish by transferring their expertise in programme design to the local branch, Also I wish to further develop this relationship by giving more trust to our local branch and involve our faculty in some mutual projects. For example, I wish to have some research projects where our local faculty take part in them.

Interviewer Q10: Do you expect more responsibilities to be handled by your partner? Give some examples.

Interviewee: Yes, there is no question that overall main campus branches have been demanding more flexibility from the headquarter and there is, in fact, ongoing debate between the senior management/directors of the branches and the senior administrators and academic staff in the headquarters about providing more flexibility and responsibilities to the branches because these branches are recognized as universities by the local authority. They are expected to have their own identity and to carry out more responsibilities in teaching and learning compared to the one which we currently have. As a branch, we have no room to expand or to have our own local programmes, the main campus controls all the strategic and academic decisions which are highly centralized. Currently, the main campus is working in a new organization structure and we hope that this issue is taken into consideration.

Interviewer Q11: Do you think the current affiliation model works well in your institution or not, why?

Interviewee: We have regular communication with our partner in different affiliation aspects, this communication informs us about our compliance toward quality standards set by our partner and how far our local institution from these standards. As a senior member at this branch for almost 10 years, I have been involved in many discussions at our headquarters as being a member of the university council. One of the discussions that take place is to give the branches the right to go for more than one affiliation. There is a desire to expand our affiliation to be able to embrace new programmes that serve the local market. Currently, we are captive and the current main campus policies do not allow us to do so. Since this branch started, we are offering only business and human resource programmes with very limited programmes options. The local market is moving toward diversity and there are many new opportunities where new programmes can be offered to respond to the local economic expansion. Unfortunately, we cannot offer new programmes because our main campus is not offering them. There is a desire to expand our affiliation from one central affiliation with our main campus into multiple affiliations. The other area that required more attention is making sure that there is more contribution from the branch in programme development, at least 30 40% of the content of the programme has to be developed locally and the rest comes from the main campus, by doing that we can assure that our programmes are meeting the local need and respond to the local culture.

Interviewer Q12: Do you think there is a direct relationship between the maturity of the institute and the need for such affiliation?

Interviewee: There is a growing feeling among all branches that we have reached a level of maturity which enables us to make more decisions both in the content of the programme and the assessment of students work. I believe that our partner institution do understand such growth requirements and they do understand that different programmes belong to different regional needs. The problem with foreign programmes is that they are most appropriate for the original home country context but might not be the right fit for our local setting. As a branch,



I am pretty sure that we have enough expertise and maturity to design programmes that are more appropriate to Oman and the region and the time has come to do that.

Interviewer Q13: Do you think MoHE gives enough flexibility to implement offshore programmes in Oman?

Interviewee: The current policies that are undertaking by the Ministry impose all private institutions to have affiliation with international universities prior to establishment. This concept by itself hindering the development of local capacity. The ministry policy might be justified and feasible at a certain point of time, but this policy should consider the maturity of the local institution. Universities and colleges required more flexibility and autonomy to develop and offer their own programmes. I would say that the ministry was flexible in giving the institutions the freedom to choose their own partners and their own affiliation types, however, there are still constraints in the way that ministry deals with the validated programmes. In one hand the ministry insists that local institutions follow -by book- all programme content of the affiliation, on the other hand, the ministry through its external reviewers might suggest some changes to the programme. As a branch, we do not have the flexibility to change any programme content as these contents are centralized and it is the same for all branches. The ministry should understand these limitations.

Interviewer Q14: How can MoHE improve its current regulatory system to give enough flexibility for implementing offshore programmes?

Interviewee:

The offshore programmes are usually validated by international universities and many of them have their own internal quality and external review before the programme is validated so I think most of the necessary reviews have already taken into consideration. So, I think for such programmes when they are offered for licensing to the local ministry, they should have a different licensing scheme depend on the type of programme affiliation. I am not suggesting here to depend totally on the affiliate approval process rather review the current licensing procedures to focus more on the aspects related to culture and contextualization. I think MoHE has to reconsider its current programme licensing process to give the local institution the freedom to offer similar programmes of parent university without local intervention in changing the structure or the number of the programme credit hours which are very difficult to change as per affiliation policies.

Interviewer: OK Dr.****, thank you so much for your time and I really enjoyed learning from your rich experience about the pros and cons of the affiliation. This is really kind of you.

*****End of the Interview*****

Appendix 9: Overall Demographics of the Participants

1. Demographic profile of MoHE interviewees

Interviewee Code	overall experience in HE	Experience dealing with IUPs	Gender
<i>Interviewee 1</i>	25	5 yrs	<i>Male</i>
<i>Interviewee 2</i>	18	12 yrs	<i>Female</i>
<i>Interviewee 3</i>	20	8 yrs	<i>Female</i>



2. Demographics profile of management members from PHEIs

Institution	Position	Total year of Experience in HEIs	Total year of Experience in leading offshore programme
Franchised	Dean	25 years	10 years
Franchised	Head of Department (HoD)	18 years	12 years
Validation	Dean	22 years	10 years
Validation	Head of Department (HoD)	23 years	8 years
Branch Campus	Dean	25 years	12 years
Branch Campus	Head of Department (HoD)	20 years	6 years

3. Demographic profile of students focus groups classified by gender, age, and study courses of the respondents

Demography	Classification	N	% of Respondents
Gender	Male	26	63.4%
	Female	15	36.6%
Total			100
Study course	MBA (Master in Business Administration)	31	75.6%
	Master in other business studies	10	24.4%
Total			100
Age			
	25-30 years	6	14.3%
	30 - 35 years	10	24.4%

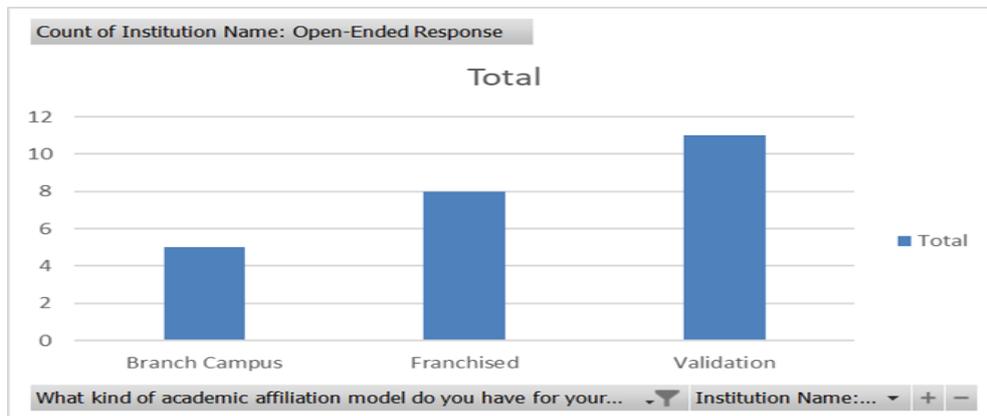


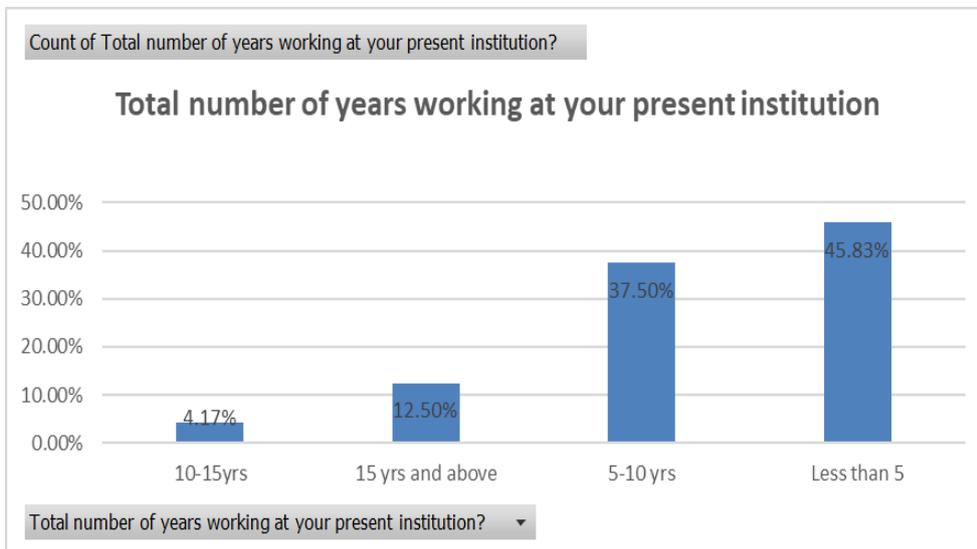
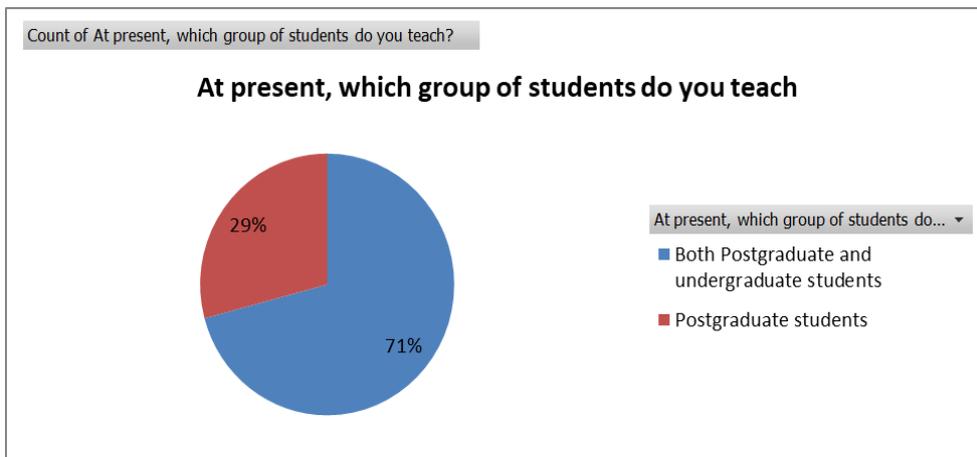
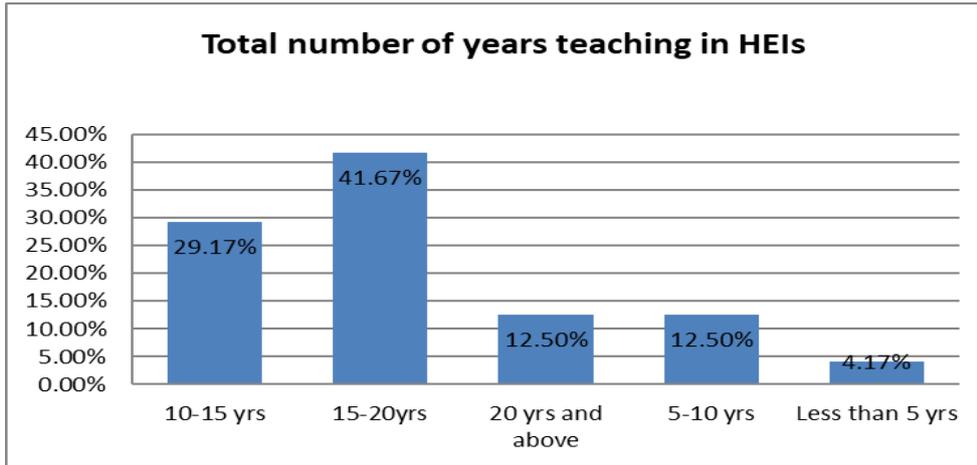
	35 - 40 years	25	61.3%
Total			100
Year of study	Year 1	11	28%
	Year 2	30	72%
Total	41		100%

Appendix 10: Sample of Questionnaire Results

Overall Statistical Analysis

Row Labels	Count of Institution Affiliation Model
Branch Campus	5
Franchised	8
Validation	11
Grand Total	24

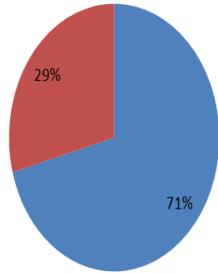






Count of Do you think this model works well in term of improving the quality of teaching in your local institution ?

Do you think this model works well in term of improving the quality of teaching in your local institution

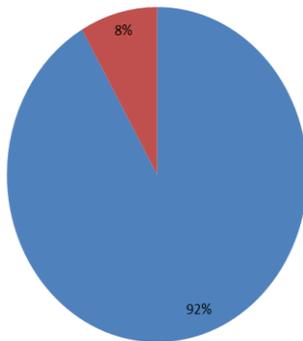


Do you think this model works well in term of improving...

- Extremely Well
- Good but required some improvements

Count of From your perspective; who should play a greater role in managing the quality of teaching in offshore programmes?

Who should play a greater role in managing the quality of teaching in offshore programmes



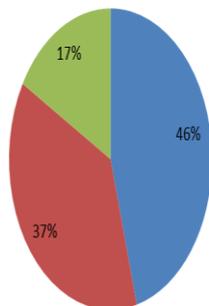
From your perspective; who should play a greater role in...

- Both Local and Partner institutions in cooperation should be the main players
- Partner University should be the sole player in the quality of teaching of offshore programmes

Institution Name: Open-Ended Response

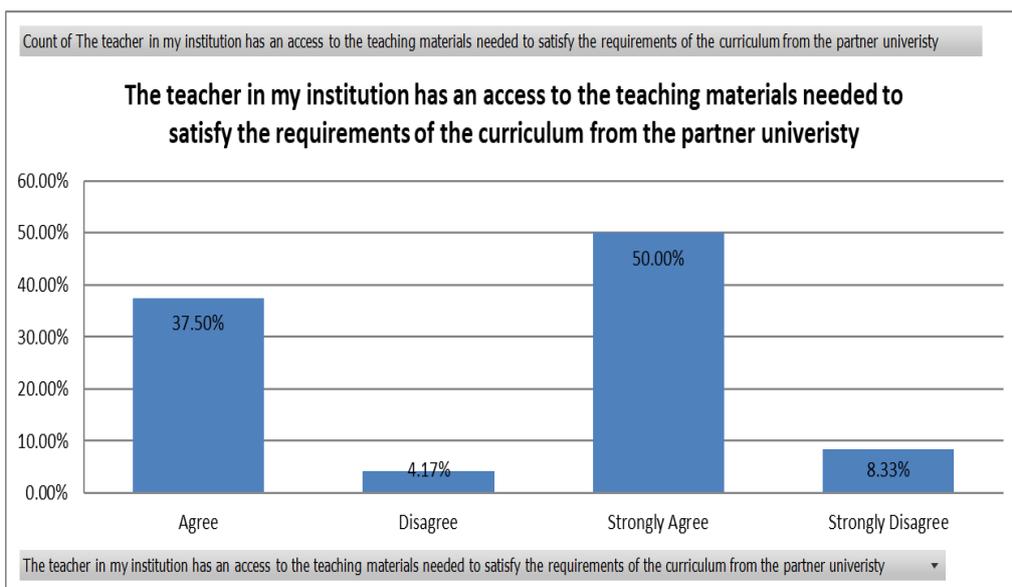
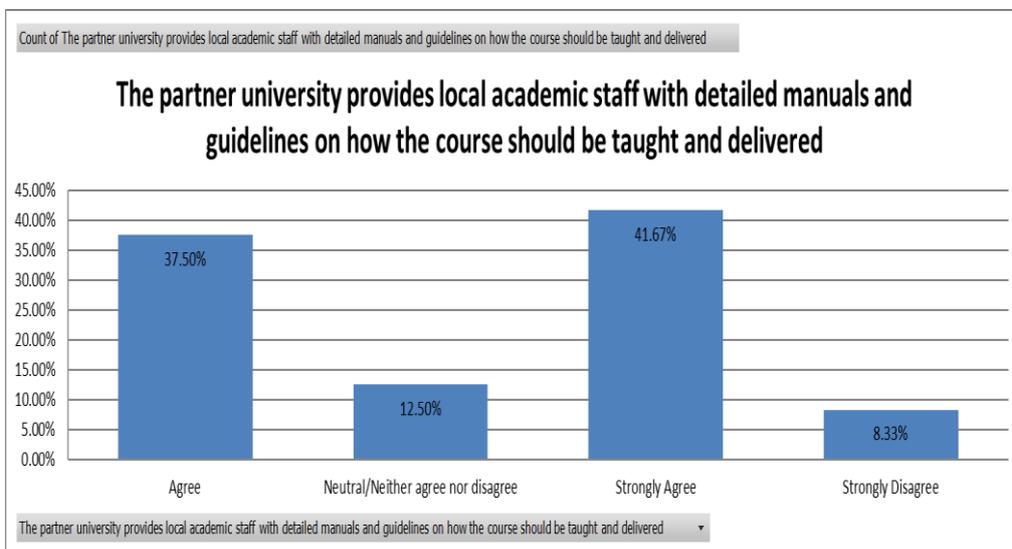
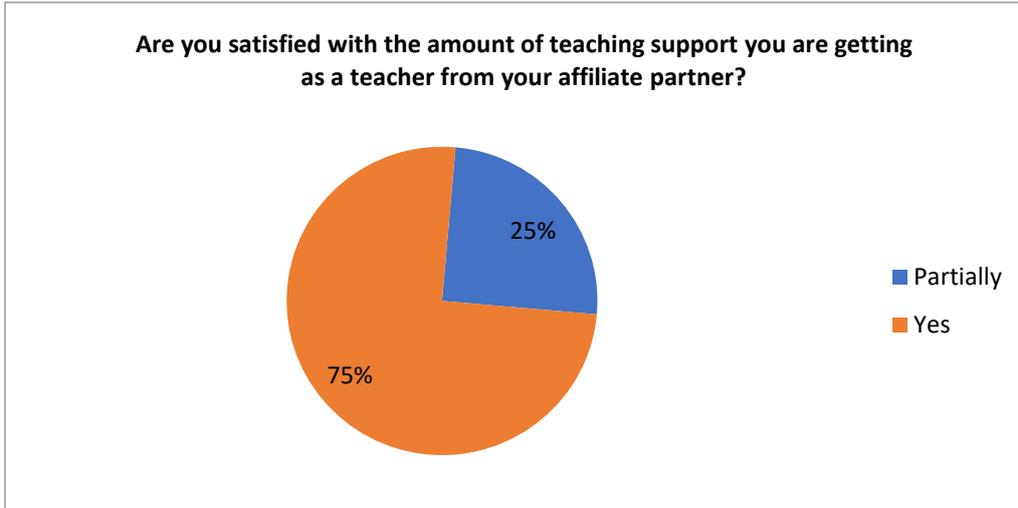
Count of From your perspective; to what extent has the affiliate partner fulfilled its responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programs in your institution?

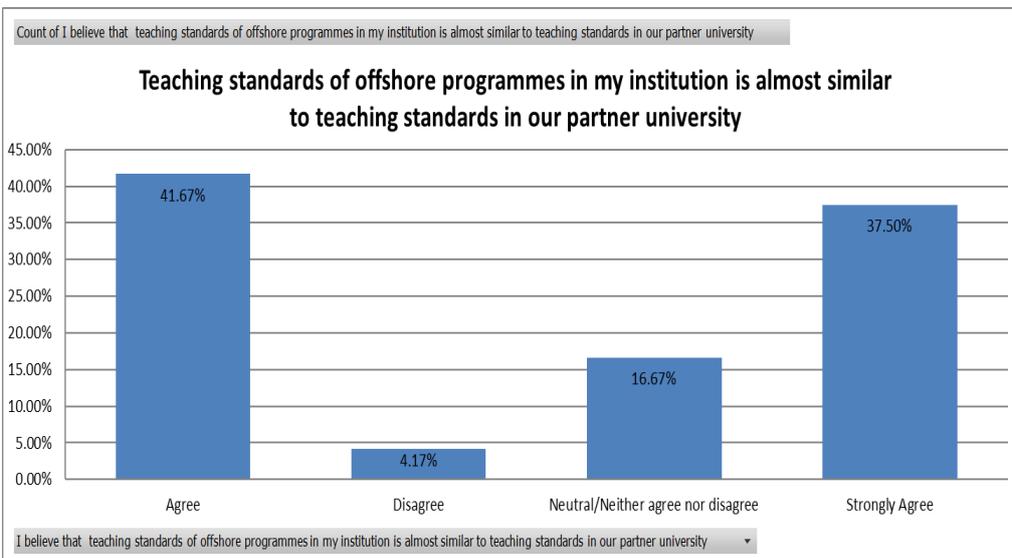
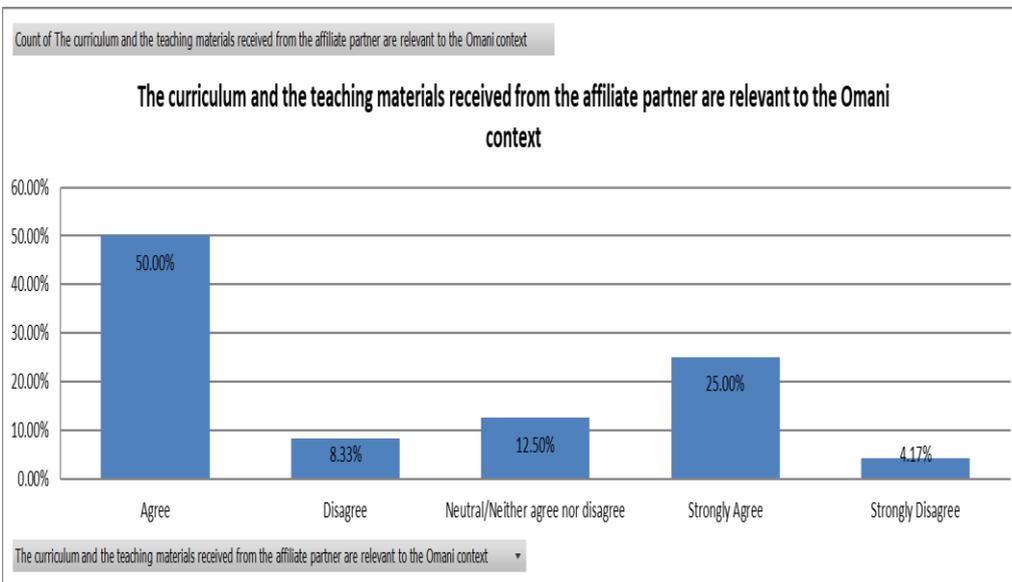
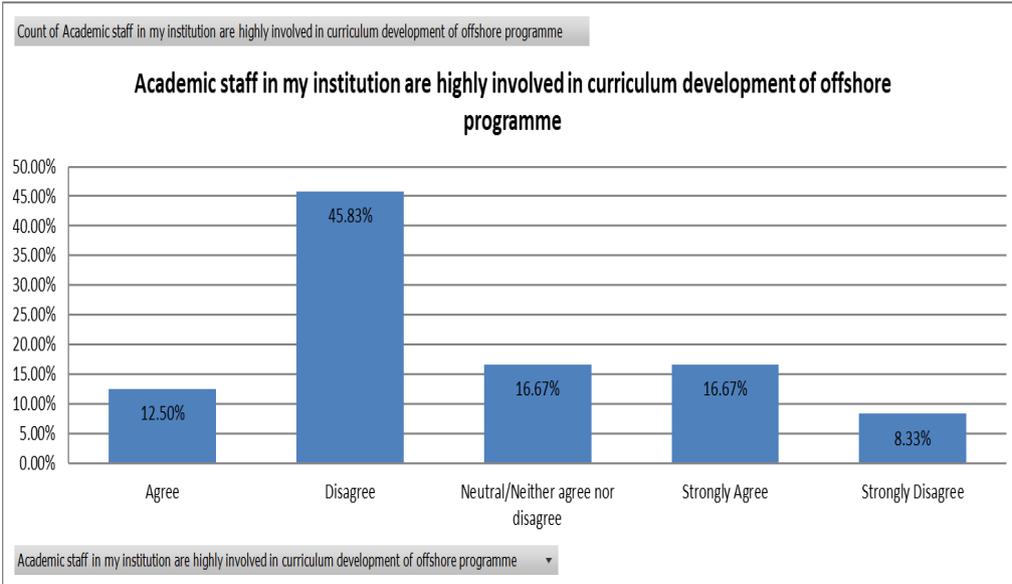
To what extent has the affiliate partner fulfilled its responsibilities in assuring the quality of teaching of offshore programs in your institution

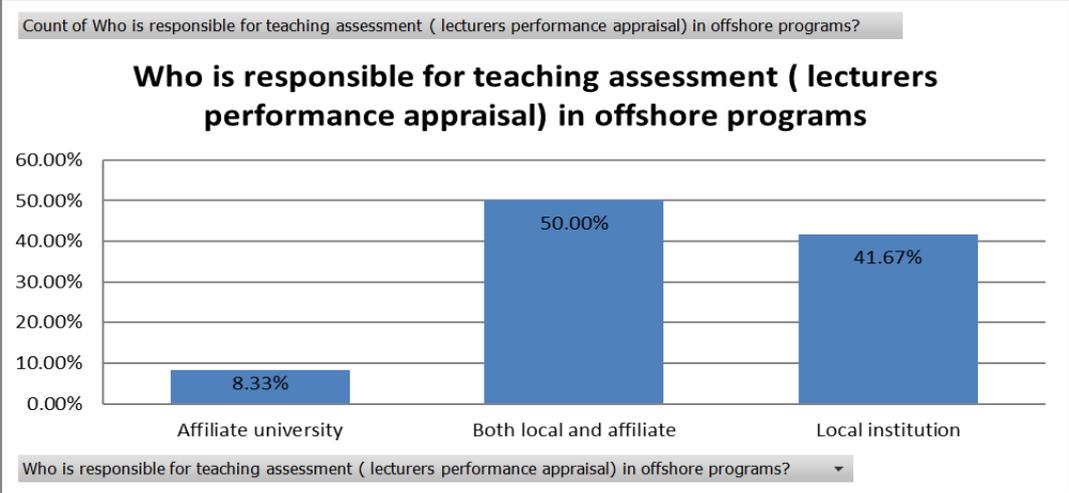
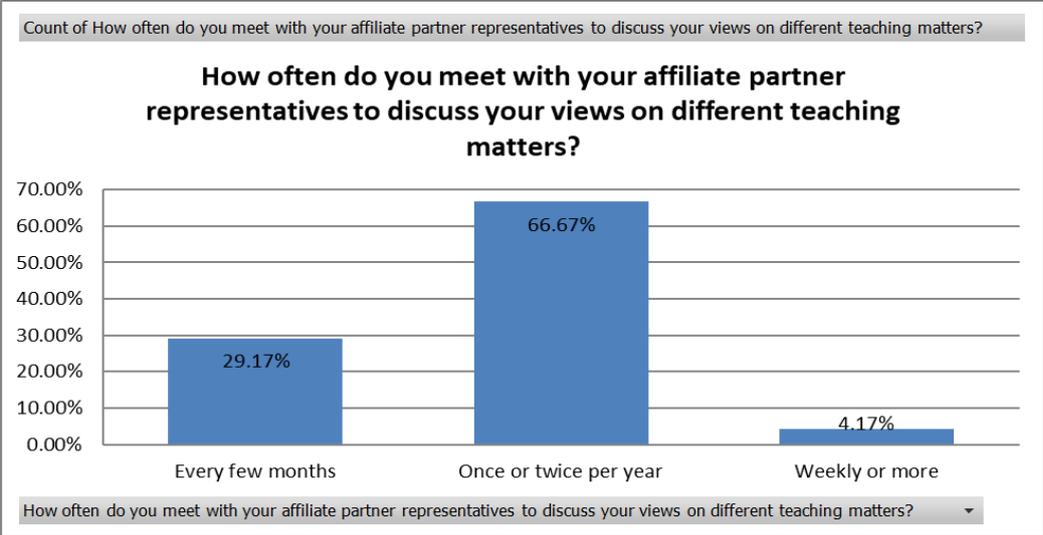
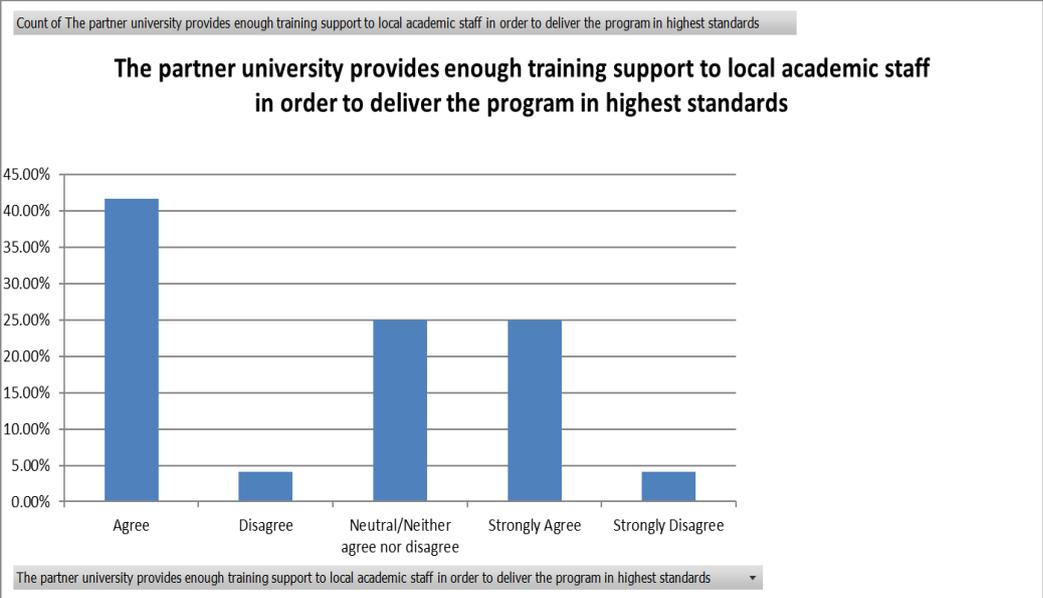


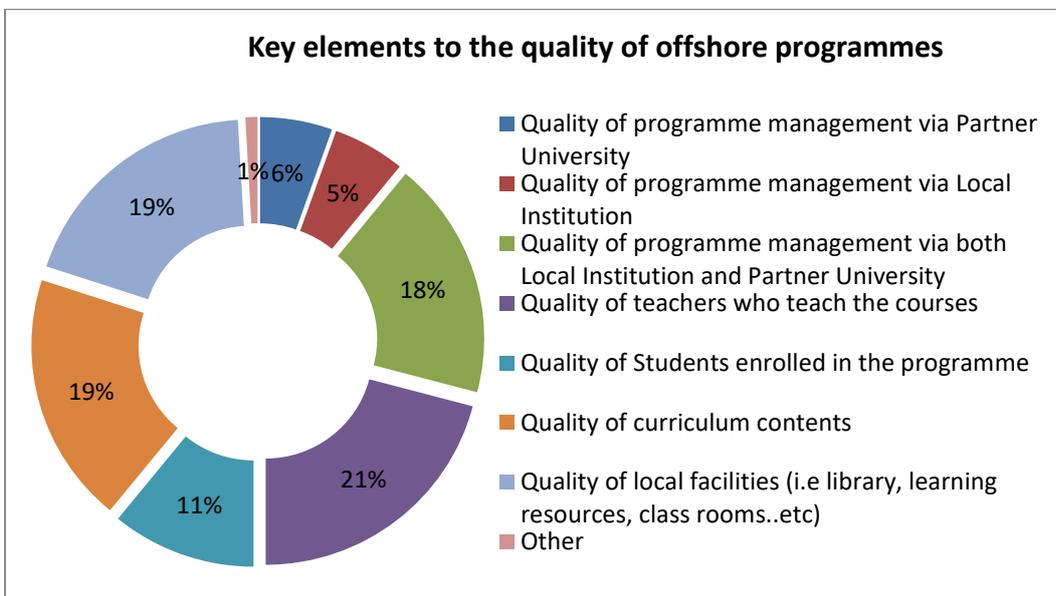
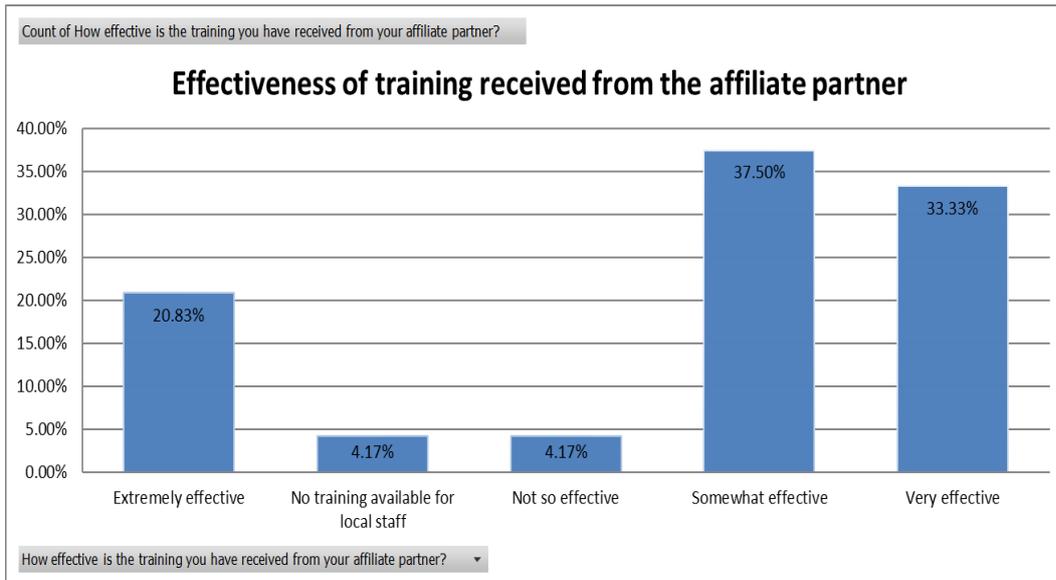
From your perspective; to what extent has the affiliate partner...

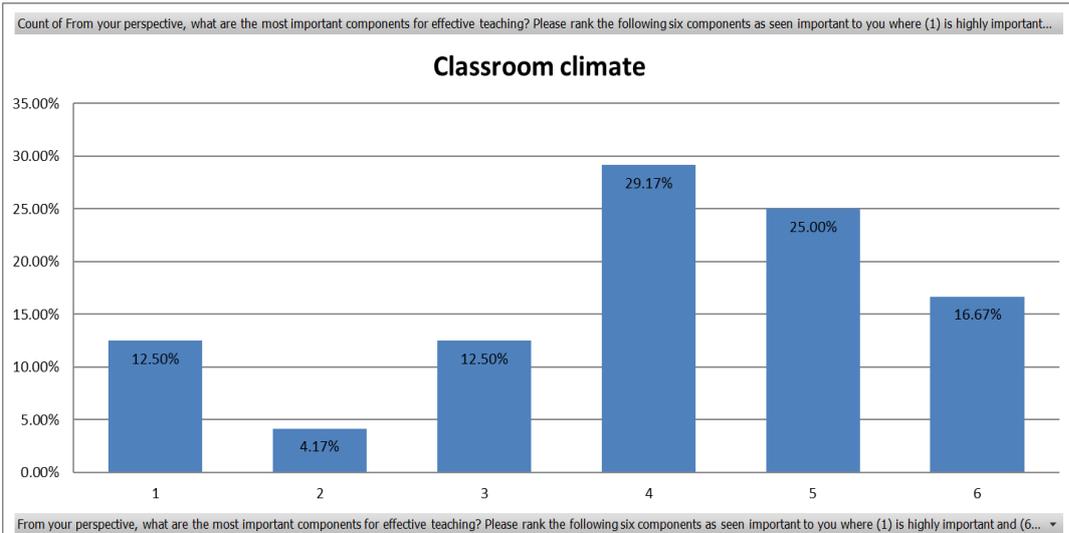
- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount



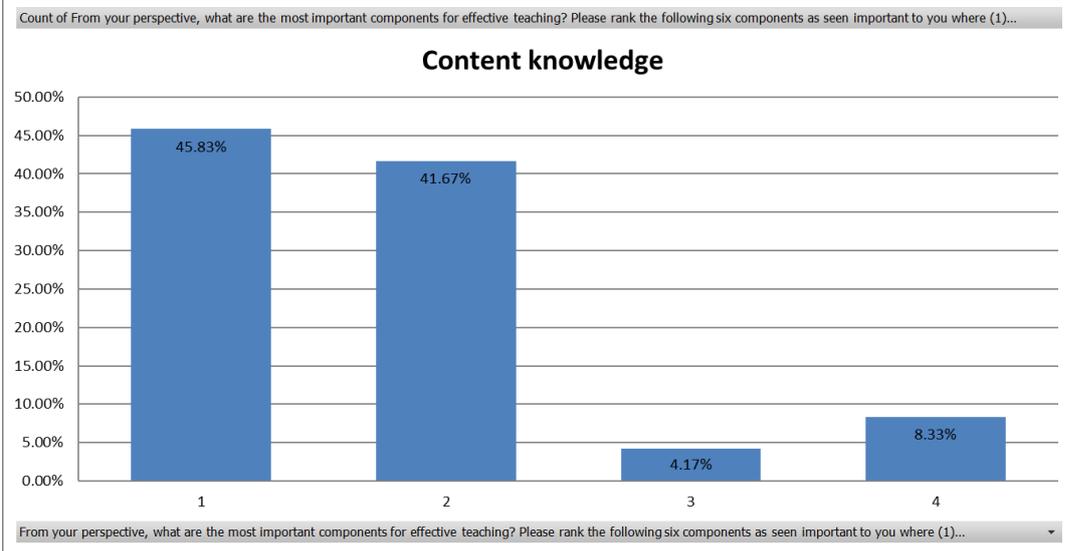




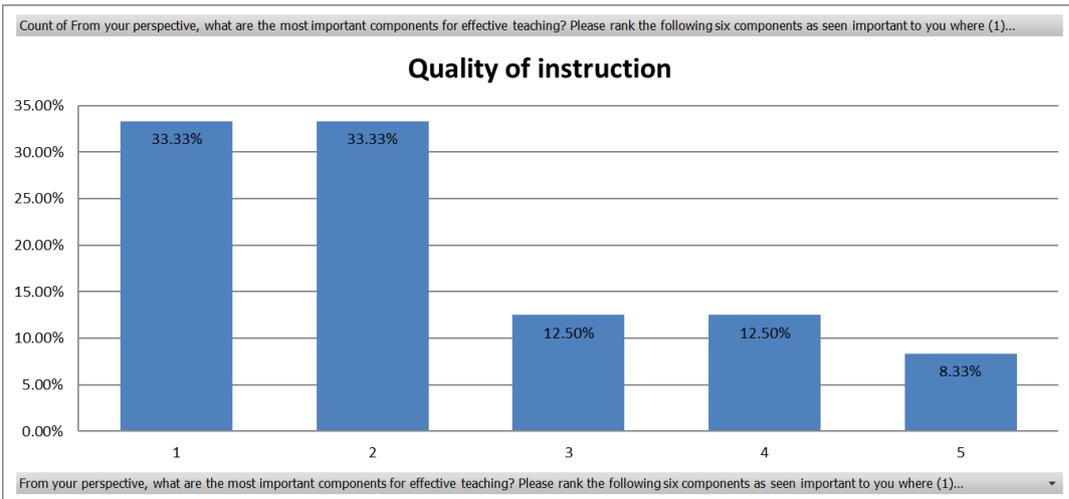




From your perspective, what are the most important components for effective teaching? Please rank the following six components as seen important to you where (1) is highly important and (6...



From your perspective, what are the most important components for effective teaching? Please rank the following six components as seen important to you where (1)...



From your perspective, what are the most important components for effective teaching? Please rank the following six components as seen important to you where (1)...

