

Towards Economic diversification by Enhancing Inflow of International Students to Oman

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Abstract

The higher education in the GCC region in general and Oman in particular has shown tremendous growth in internationalization of higher education since late 1990s as private universities and colleges were permitted to establish affiliation with foreign universities and higher education institutions (HEIs). The government has been proactively investing in improvising its human capital through higher education. Furthermore, the country enjoys many advantages over other GCC countries with respect to foreign policy, political stability, global competitiveness index and global peace index. Despite its established advantages, the rate of inflow of foreign students is not encouraging. This paper overviews the globalization of higher education in terms of inbound and outbound ratios in the GCC region and attempts to provide an outline for enhancing the inflow of international students to Oman. The inflow of international students will contribute to the economic growth of Oman economy as well.

Keywords: *Internationalization, Higher Education, GCC, Oman*

Introduction

Internationalization of education is defined as “It is higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, program, institution or provider and course materials become cross-national. The cross-border education may include higher education by public, private, not-for-profit and for-profit providers. It encompasses a wide range of modalities in a continuum from in person (students traveling abroad and having campuses abroad) to distance learning using technologies and including e-learning” [1]. In simple words, internationalization is a way of introducing an international outlook into education.

In the contemporary world, globalization has become a revolutionary development in higher education. It has become an important part of national trade policies. It creates financial resources to academic institutions and spurs growth in economies. It brings intelligent students from different parts of the world and offers an opportunity to improve diplomatic relations with other economies. The overall demand for international education and professional training is increasing in most of the countries. The annual report published by UNESCO Institute of Statistics [2] shows that the international movement of students has increased from 2.1 million to 3.4 million students from 2018 to 2020. Several factors have contributed in this regard, for instance, development of information technology, population growth, desire for higher education, etc. With this increased demand of higher education, the ability of domestic educational institutions to attract foreign students is entailed. Several countries are designing different policies to internationalize the education and to attract as many international students as possible. To recruit international students, domestic universities must meet the international educational standards since the students have to compete internationally and are expected to solve problems from multiple perspectives. The rationale for internationalization of education is categorized into 4 aims:

- *Academic* (new knowledge, applications for knowledge, intellectual interaction)
- *Socio-cultural* development (equality, justice, inter-cultural understanding)
- *Political* (peace and security, global positioning, workforce development)
- *Economic* (global competition, preparing students for employment in global context)

Literature Review

With the wave of globalization and free trade, researchers and policy makers have been focusing on the internationalization of higher education in the academic world. A broad range of internationalization's effects have been identified and examined by researchers and policy makers. The internationalization of higher education is widely considered as one of the important factor that affects the existing body of knowledge of a country through cross-border exchange of students, teachers and learning best practices [3]. Therefore, numerous studies about the internationalization of education have been conducted for many countries over the recent past.

The growth trajectory of higher education in the GCC with reference to the quality of education and aspect of internationalization. The study found that the GCC countries were heading towards internationalization of higher education [4]. The impact of internationalization of education on Chinese economy for the period of 1978 to 2007 has been overviewed. The study analyzed the impact of outbound students on Chinese economy and found a positive impact on the enhancement of skills and growth in body of knowledge and innovations [5]. The concern about the quality of higher education with internationalization motive for GCC economies has been examined [6]. According to the study, the achievement of high quality of education through internationalization is a big challenge for policy makers.

Internationalization of Higher Education in Oman

The Sultanate of Oman under the wise leadership of HM Sultan Qaboos Bin Saeed has adopted the policy of promoting education in many ways. Apart from establishing public schools and higher education institutions, the government of Oman has allowed private sector to establish educational institutions across the country. The efforts of internationalization of education in the country stem from 1990s when the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) made it compulsory for HEIs to affiliate with an international higher educational institution [6]. The idea behind this condition might be to have collaboration in education sector and to transfer the knowledge and skills in Oman. In addition to that, the MOHE has had granted foreign study scholarships for Omanis students in facilitating the learning process inside the country by providing internet facility and other necessary infrastructural development. As a result many students went abroad to get higher education and the trend has increased with fast pace. Table 1 reflects the inbound and outbound ratios of GCC region with respect to students pursuing their higher degree programs.

“The outbound mobility ratio, i.e. the number of students from a country studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country”. Approximately 11000 Omani students were studying in foreign universities mainly in USA, UK, Australia & other countries; the number of inbound students in 2020-21 stood around 3000 [3]. Nearly 1000 expatriate students enrolled in HEIs in Oman during the academic year of 2020-21 and majority of inbound students study in private HEIs [8].

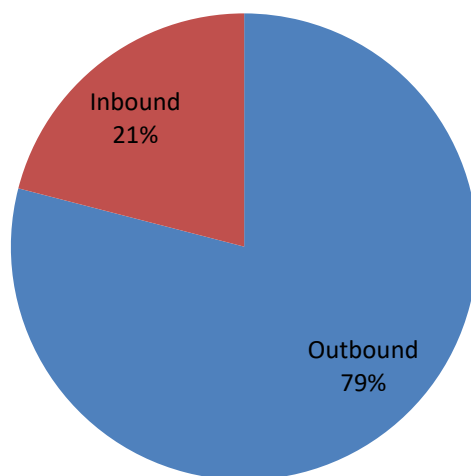


Figure 1: Percentage of outbound Omani students to inbound international students during the academic year 2020-21

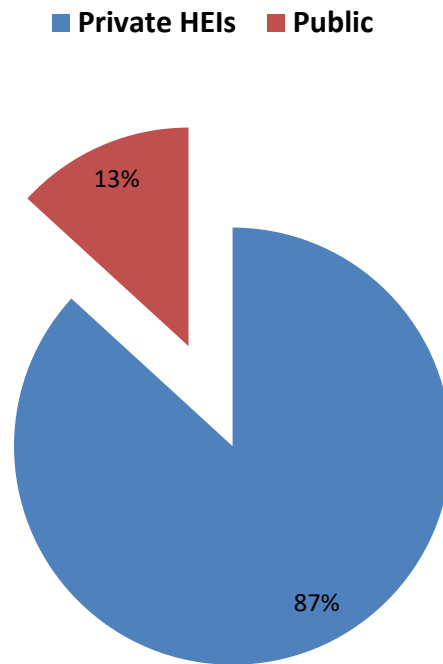


Figure 2: Percentage of expatriate students pursuing higher degree course in Oman during the academic year 2020-21

Country	Inbound students	Inbound Ratio (%)	Outbound students	Outbound Ratio (%)
Bahrain	5,000	13.2	4,500	12.1
Kuwait	2500	4.5	16,800	23.4
Oman	3,000	3.0	11,300	14.5
Qatar	10,000	39.9	5,000	24.1
Saudi Arabia	72,000	4.8	3,500	5.4
U.A.E	64,000	44.8	8,500	6.4

Table 1: Numerical representation of the inflow and outflow of students in the GCC during the academic year 2015-16

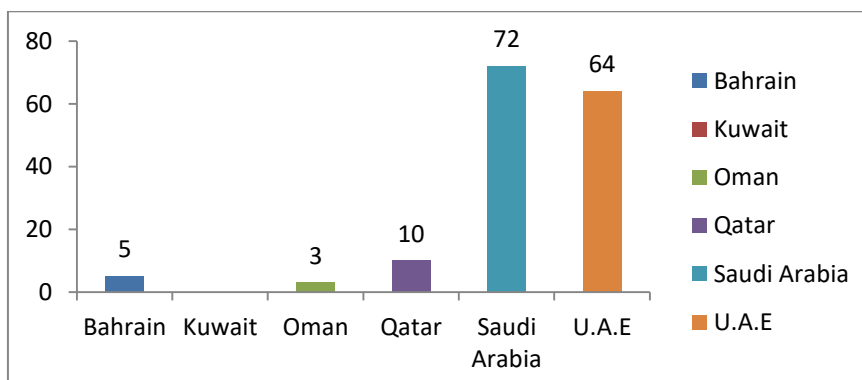


Figure 3: Inbound students (in 000s) in the GCC countries during the academic year of 2015-16

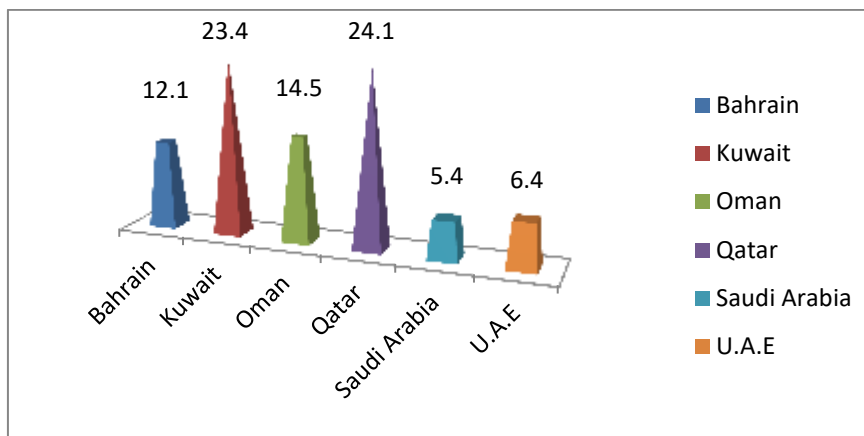


Figure 4: Outbound ratio of students in the GCC during academic year 2020-21 (%)

According to the above figures and table, the outbound student ratio is the highest for Qatar followed by Kuwait. It is noteworthy that the inbound student ratio for Qatar is around 40% i.e. the second highest after the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E). These results indicate that the internationalization of education is much higher in the both countries that could be attributed to the presence of international higher educational institution campuses in the territories of the countries. In case of Oman, the outbound ratio stands 3rd amongst the GCC counterparts, but the inbound ratio is at dismal 3%.

The higher education sector in Oman has been dependent on foreign faculty. The HEIs in Oman are allowed to hire full time, part time and visiting foreign faculty to meet the sector demand. Moreover, number of academic program offered with the affiliation of foreign universities also increased year by year. Some of the foreign university programs require foreign faculty to spend three to six weeks at HEI in Oman to share their knowledge and conduct workshops/seminars for undergraduate and post-graduate students. This definitely helps to increase the interaction between Oman and foreign universities that will open for future research collaboration and faculty change. Furthermore, The Research Council (TRC), Oman has started the program of Travel Grants for Researchers. Under this program financial assistance is provided to university faculty members, university staff and PhD scholars mainly from the public sector universities/DAIs going abroad to attend international conferences, pursue post-doctorate or any other kind of research.

According to the NCSI report 2020-21, 87% international students are studying in various private educational institutions in Oman [9]. Most of international students are studying on their own. Contrary to this, most of Omani students studying abroad are state sponsored. Therefore, net cash inflow from foreign students is trivial. Government of Oman is striving hard to turn Oman into a knowledge based economy. The objective is to make Oman a hub of international higher education in the Middle East. For this purpose, Oman has been investing a huge share of budget in education for last three decades.

Why foreign students should study in Oman

Oman has many advantages for international students to study. Some of the advantages are discussed below:-

- Oman is at the geographic, historical and cultural cross-roads of the world with a tremendous mediation efforts put forth by HIS Majesty Sultan Qaboos. It is also a role model for Islamic world due to reconciliation of foreign policy.
- Oman is a multi-cultural society which welcomes various nationalities to work and reside and is becoming a more open society with the concept of enlightened modernization.
- Oman enjoys political stability since 1970s.
- Oman ranked second in happiness index in GCC [10]
- Oman bagged 47 number in the Global Competitiveness Index for year 2020 [11]
- Oman ranked at 74 in global peace index [12]
- Oman has built a world-class road network and is moving ahead aggressively to improve the air and sea network
- People of Oman are famous for hospitality and enjoy a good reputation in the world

- The private sector in the country is growing and government is focusing on economic diversification
- The ongoing academic accreditation processes in Oman is posing a good posture for international world and it could attract more international students
- The higher educational institutions have been increasing since 1990s making education as a one of the most attractive sector for investment
- Many universities/ colleges in Oman are offering over 700 programs with the affiliation of international universities from various countries such as U.S.A, U. K, Germany, India, Jordon and others
- English is the medium of instruction in all the universities, which is a very significant and encouraging feature for foreign students

Steps to Enhance Inflow of International Students

Sultanate of Oman has definitely been putting in lot of efforts towards internationalization of higher education in the country. However, below are few key steps which would enable the country to enhance the pace of internationalization and reap its rewards:

- Oman should tie up with top universities of the world and facilitate the establishment of their campuses here
- Oman should take steps to minimize bureaucracy prevalent at different stages, enabling faster and smoother process of international tie-ups
- Oman should brand itself to the international community as an educational hub with world-class facilities
- It should have a dedicated group appointed at the ministerial level to ease the flow of inbound students into the country
- Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), Oman should put more efforts towards the accreditation processes and standardize them at the earliest
- MoHE, Oman should facilitate intellectually stimulating environment to international students while they are pursuing the degree programs
- MoHE, Oman should standardize the processes of recognizing and encourage blended learning degree programs offered jointly by established and accredited foreign universities and HEIs based in Oman

Conclusion

Oman has been continuously putting efforts towards internationalization of education. It has done well to increase the outbound ratio of students, though there is still much scope for improvement. However, it has to aggressively push towards increasing the inbound ratio. This paper was an attempt to study the present situation of the higher education system in Oman. Extensive research work could be carried out to conduct in-depth research on the underlying factors of internationalization of higher education, influencing the students on a micro level and its impact on the GDP of the country on a macro level.

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